

# Rev. Sean B. Flanagan: A Memoir

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## The Early Years

I think it was the great Bible scholar, Ronald Knox, when commenting on the Book of Genesis, said every book should begin with the words, “In the beginning.” Well for me, “In the beginning” was my parents, Joseph Malachy Flanagan and Mary Catherine Gallagher. I will begin with my mother, nearly always referred to as Mary Kate. She was the third oldest of nine children. She migrated to the United States when she was sixteen. Her decision to come to New York was probably based on the fact that her oldest brother, Ambrose, was already there.

She got a job as a domestic with a wealthy family called “The Haigs” in White Plains, New York, first as a domestic and then as a nanny to the young girls. The girls absolutely adored her. I knew this because when she returned to Ireland she would receive paper cuttings describing the “coming out” events of the girls and much more besides.

She would have one day off each week, and that day she would spend with her sister, Bessie, in New York City. Bessie married Tom Walsh from County Westford. After ten years, Mary Kate decided to return to Ireland for the Eucharistic Congress of 1932. The Congress was a religious event that gave the new Irish, independent state, a chance to show off. And show off they did. One million people filled the 1900 acre Phoenix Park for the closing event of the Congress. Brilliantly organized by General O’Duffy, it concluded the Mass with John McCormack singing “Panis Angelicus.” Probably the most remembered event in the life of Count McCormack!

I think mother had more planned than just to attend the Congress! There was a huge chest in the attic which would include numerous outfits for mother to wear. Aunt Bessie told me that when she sailed for Ireland there was a young police lieutenant who cried when he waved good- bye on

the shore. She must have had a thing about policemen because she was to hook up with another policeman less than a year after coming back to Ireland.

Which, of course, brings us to Joseph Malachy Flanagan. He was the youngest of ten, five boys and five girls. Born in 1900, he joined the Garda, (Guardians of the Peace,) on his birthday, December 4, 1922. They chose to be an unarmed police force, a very wise decision as a Civil War was in full force at that time. There was no honor in shooting an unarmed policeman. The first shooting of a policeman didn't take place until 1947, and it was a tragic event that should not have occurred.

Dad was a very handsome man, much pursued by the ladies. I saw photos of three guards and three ladies, and it was obvious that Dad was a ladies' man. But he remained a bachelor longer than most of his confrères. He was also a generous man. Vincie McKeon, whose mother owned a restaurant and bar, told me he would buy rounds of drinks "for the boys." They were appreciative of it because most of them didn't "have two shillings to rub together." Very few people had a salary coming into the house.

Being a happy-go-lucky bachelor, Dad was able to return frequently to see his family in County Leitrim. They lived 2 1/2 miles from the town of Drumshanbo, and in the town-land of Cornashamsogue, (the Hill of the Shamrocks). There was some kind of destiny about it because mother came from the little village of Kiltubrid, three miles the other way from Drumshanbo.

A tenant farmer called and told me "Only for me, you wouldn't be in it!" "How so?" I asked. "Because I persuaded your Dad to go to a dance where he met your mother."

Reluctantly Dad went to the barn dance where he met my mother, and that was the end of his bachelorhood. Aunt Mary told me that Dad told her,

“I met the loveliest girl I ever saw last night,” and Aunt Mary knew there was something different this time.

They were to meet often after that in Drumshanbo, but mostly in Dublin. I have a picture of them crossing O’Connell’s Bridge over the river Liffey. Dad was strutting proudly, and mother was hanging onto his arm in an affectionate and cuddly fashion. They dated a full year and then returned to Kiltubrid to be married in the historic, exquisite, seventeenth-century chapel that was recently restored. Dad was stationed first in Cabinteeley, but when they married, they rented a house in Dundrum. The backyard was bordered by the parking lot of Holy Cross Church. (Some destiny here!) The rents were very high in Dundrum, and the Superintendent, a Leitrim man, advised Dad to move to Wicklow, thirty miles south of Dublin by the coast. They rented a lovely house, one of eight in St. Patrick’s Terrace and only a half mile from the much pictured, Silver Strand.

Born on May 11, 1935, I was their first born and named Sean after two grandfathers, Sean (or John) Flanagan and Sean Gallagher. My Godfather by proxy was Sean Gallagher who lived in the neighborhood of Manhattan. Alice or Ann Gallagher, Godmother by proxy, lived in Birmingham, England. When I was about to be born, mother moved into a Nursing Home at 31 Upper Mount Street in Dublin. It was opposite St. Stephen’s Presbyterian Church. Popularly known as the “Pepper Canister Church” in Stephen’s Green which, I believe, it got its name from the church.

I was baptized in St. Andrew’s Church on Westland Row, a very historic church where Daniel O’Connell, the Irish Liberator, attended when he was in Dublin. Across the street from the church was the house where Oscar Wilde was born. Incidentally, when Daniel O’Connell went up to receive Communion, he wore white gloves as remorse for having killed a man D’Esteere, in a duel. On the street outside, Robert Emmett was arrested and later executed for treason. That area is full of history.

Mother was very generous, too. She paid off all the family debts. When Uncle Pat got tuberculosis, she took to the home in Wicklow and cared for him until he died. She also brought her younger sister, Lizzie, up to Wicklow where she completed her high school (called Secondary School in Ireland). The headmaster told Dad that she was the brightest student he ever had.

Talking about mother's generosity, one incident stands out. We lived next door to a pub. Apparently one man caused so much ruckus in the bar area that he had to be pulled from the bar. They got him half-way up the street, and thought they were finished with him. Typical of an alcoholic, he returned and found the main door to the bar closed. And even though the windows and the door were doubly louvered, he mashed his right hand through the window, retired to the middle of the street with dark red blood pouring from his hand. Mother heard the ruckus and came to see what was happening. She quickly assessed the situation, ran back to the house, got a white sheet, tore it into strips, and rushed over to the man. Despite his flailing arms, she managed to get close enough to apply a tourniquet, and stopped the bleeding. I do believe she saved the man's life. He never returned to thank her, but I was awfully proud of my mother. I imagine she must have got some first-aid training when she was working with the Haigs in White Plains. That episode, and others just like it, made me aware of the ugly side of alcoholism.

Wicklow was a great town, and still is, but it had considerable bunch of useless men who lived off the dole. A bunch of them put enough money to go to America. They found they had to work hard to keep a job. All of them returned to Wicklow within six months. As Dad said they weren't like the Mayo workers who left poverty. They knew that they had nothing to return to in Ireland. They buckled down, worked hard and paved the way for success of the generation after them. (By the way statistics show that only 10% of the Irish ever returned to Ireland, compared to 60% of the Greeks.) Dad

had great respect for the farming community that lived outside Wicklow Town. They were honest, hard working, and respectful of the police. Incidentally most of them were Protestant.

Our days in Wicklow were very happy ones. Mother, probably following the American experience, hired a baby-sitter from the Cliff houses across the street. We remember the constant baby-sitter, Angela McDermott. We made several attempts to contact Angela at her house on the cliff, but we were never able to get her to answer the doorbell.

Dad and mother loved to entertain, and Dad had a good relationship with his confrères. Superintendent Reynolds was a Kilkenny man who had a good relationship with his men. We were to renew our acquaintanceship years later. The sergeant, Sergeant Taylor from County Kerry became great friends and got to know well mother's sisters and their families. It led to correspondence that went on for years. Mrs. Taylor, and her sister, Mrs. Quirke, had a brother, Maurice Dee, who was a Monsignor in Los Angeles.

Dad told me of an incident where I was looking out the front door and a gust of wind came that swept the heavy door toward the jam where I had my finger wrapped around it. Dad saw what was happening and managed to stop the door from slamming on my fingers. I would have lost the fingers if it weren't for my Dad's quick action. I wouldn't have been ordained a priest if I had lost those fingers. I met the Taylors years later and Sergeant Taylor told me that my mother, despite her years in America remained the lovely country girl that she was when she left for America at sixteen.

While still in Wicklow town my brother, Vincent, was born on February 8th, 1937. He was named Vincent after St. Vincent, the hermit, celebrated on January 23rd which was the feast close to his birthday and a name mother liked. He was also called Vincent Patrick after his uncle Patrick who lived with us for a few years. My Aunt Lizzie said that I, at two years, couldn't pronounce the name of Vincent, but settled for "Vinkie" and myself,

“Tawnie.” I don’t know if my Aunt Lizzie came up with that herself. She was an expert at giving children pet names.

## **Move to the West**

Wicklow was a good experience, but things change. Mother inherited the farm in County Leitrim, and Dad and she decided to move to the West of Ireland to be close to the farm. Police then and now were not allowed to be policemen in their own county. The idea behind that was that they might favor their relatives in that county, so they moved to County Roscommon, the neighboring county to Leitrim County. When I was four, we moved to Castlerea, County Roscommon.

So they rented a lovely apartment in the center of town over Hayes Chemist (in America “pharmacy”) and opposite McDermots Department Store. Castlerea would have had a population of about 500. Its claim to fame was the fact that three miles out of the town was the home of O’Connor Duns, descendants of the High Kings of Ireland. The High Kings were usually the O’Neills of Ulster, but the O’Connors held the office for a few generations. And incidentally the Flanagans were originally part of the O’Connor Clan. In the 12th Century a character called O’Connor, “the ruddy faced.” Separated from the O’Connor clan and started a separate line called Flanagans .

I made my First Communion in Castlerea with the Roscommon Sisters of Mercy. I have an amazing memory of Vincent resisting every attempt to go to school. He would hang to a post, mother would detach his fingers from the post. It was a slow journey for sure. It was ironic that Vincent would resist school at the beginning, when in years later, he would top every test he took and got one scholarship after another.

The town also had a huge hospital which was a mental hospital first, then a TB hospital then back to Mental Home Castlerea. The town was also

a good place for traveling. It was on the main line to Dublin and coming from Castlebar in the far west.

We had friends called the McQuaides. He was a guard like Dad. She was a teacher. He came from the North; she was from Carrick-on-Shannon, the state capitol of County Leitrim. They took turns hosting dinner and always had plenty to talk about.

Up until this our lives seemed idyllic, but it was to change. Dad was doing barrack duty. He had just started when the detective emerged from the inner part of the barrack with another policeman's wife. Dad gave them both a sharp look. That was a mistake! It was the beginning of the persecution that would eventually end in Dad's early retirement. (He did complete 31 years and retired with full pension.)

I mentioned early the McDermot's Department Store across the street from our rented apartment. Well one night when Dad was on barrack duty, a young man came into the station and mentioned he saw a light coming from the basement of McDermot's. He thought it was suspicious, and Dad did, too. He promptly got up and put on his overcoat. It was in the middle of the night. He went to the back of McDermot's and found a door open leading down to the basement. He found two men with sacks stealing the best of the goods. Dad recognized one of them immediately. At the time the guards used to deliver widows' pensions and children's allowances and took turns doing different sections. They knew their people very well. There were very few unsolved crimes in those days, and if a crime was unsolved, they often had a good idea who did it. He told the two would-be robbers, "follow me to the station, and I will write the particulars."

It was unlikely that they would kill an unarmed policeman, but still Dad took a chance. He received accolades for his good police work, but it also created a problem. The guard who was supposed to be patrolling the town was not available, which was an embarrassment for him. The upshot was that Dad got a promotion in a way. He was given a choice as to what town



in the County he might like to move to. And this shows what a wonderful and thoughtful man he was. I was only seven, and Vincent five. He chose Ballaghaderreen, ten miles away from Castlerea. He chose it because it had a Secondary School, and Secondary Schools were few and far between. In six years I would start Secondary School, and Vincent would in eight years. He was thinking ahead, way ahead.

## **Life During World War II**

One thing that stood out in my mind at nine years of age was the Irish Army stopping and passing on to other towns. It took 2-1/2 hours for it to pass through. I don't know whether it was the entire army or not, but we kids were tremendously impressed. After what we saw, we said to one another, "The Germans won't dare to take us over." After the war broke out, DeVelara declared that the Irish Free State would remain neutral. Ireland's decision to remain neutral was greatly criticized in the States. I was often asked about it when I came here in 1959 and a good while afterwards. In the Republic, itself, there was relief, and Dev's popularity soared. "He kept us out of the War," was a popular phrase.

I think the Americans forgot that it was only 20 years before that the British unleashed the murderous Black and Tans on every village in the Republic. The Tans would go through each village shooting wildly. The plan was to terrorize the population into submission and give up any idea of breaking away from the British Empire. It had the opposite effect the general population was 100% behind the rebel groups. Now twenty years later, the Allies expected that the people of the Republic should now join their former persecutors. DeVelara declared neutrality, but it came at a price. A segment of the population recalling the old adage, "England's dilemma is Ireland's opportunity," saw the War as a great opportunity to get back the six counties in the North. DeVelara had to imprison those who were speaking openly. Mick Kelly, who was an uncle of our neighbor, Maureen

Egan, was imprisoned for the duration of the War. Mick Kelly said humorously that prison life was easy after being a boarder at St. Nathy's High School. He was a lawyer and an auctioneer.

It was very fortuitous that the British gave back the seaports to the Republic in 1938. Otherwise we could not have remained neutral. In order to protect our neutrality still further DeVelara ordered his foreign minister, Frank Aiken, to control the news about the war, and Aiken did just that. The idea was not to enflame the dissidents still more. Aiken did such a good job that we knew very little about the war and the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime. Not until our cousins in America started to return to Ireland as soon as the war ended. Our cousin, Sadie O'Brian had us open-mouthed as she described the horrors inflicted on the nations the Nazis had subdued, especially the Jewish people. I was only nine as Sadie described the Nazis tearing the skin off living Jews and making them into lamp-shades.

There was, of course, rationing, but the farming communities were not that much affected. They had their own cows for milking, they had chickens that laid fresh eggs, and fresh vegetables in the garden. However there were deprivations that were keenly felt by the Irish people which included the rationing of tea, sugar, and plugged tobacco. The worst deprivation was the loss of sugar; the Irish love sugar with their tea.

## **Ballaghaderreen**

Ballaghaderreen (or Balla for short) was a town with a population of 1200 people. Actually it was closer to one thousand because the Census included boarders for the High School, called St. Nathy's College. All the high schools there were dubbed "colleges."

The Gaelic for Ballaghaderreen. "Bealac-An- Doirin," means "the way of the little oak trees" because the stage coach stopped under a giant oak tree. Father Tom, my best friend, was born in that town. Every full week after

New year's Day we would take 5-1/2 days off and go to San Francisco. We always stopped and had lunch at San Luis Obispo. One Monday we were making good time and decided to keep going until we arrived at Paso Robles where we stopped for lunch at the Paso Robles Inn. I pointed out to Tom that Paso Robles had the same name as our hometown - "The Way of the Oak Trees," except the ending for Ballaghaderreen. The "een or in" made it "little oak trees." Tom being a passionate lover of his hometown, would say to the waiter, poised with her pad and pencil, "Do you know that Paso Robles is the same name as my hometown in Ireland?"

She would respond saying, "Yeah, Yeah. What do you want with your egg?"

Balla was an interesting town with a lot of history. Dominating the town square was the home of James Dillon who came from a long line of patriots. His grandfather, John Blake Dillon, was responsible for taking Balla out of Mayo in 1900 and making it part of Roscommon. James Dillon pushed to have it brought back to Mayo. Eamon DeVelara was a frequent visitor in the town and would stay at the house of L. B. Doyle. He would speak on a platform in the Square, surrounded by adoring fans who would fill the Square and overflow to the surrounding streets. I saw him and was impressed with his tall frame and his bespeckled glasses. He looked more like a University professor than a politician.

Dillon himself was a member of the Dail (equivalent to Congress in the United States). He ran for the family seat in Monaghan and won every time. He ran as an Independent and was the best speaker in the Dail. When the members would hear that Dillon was speaking, they would rush down to hear his eloquent speeches. He eventually joined the opposition party, and was promptly elected head of the party.

I grew up in Balla, and I was glad I did. When tragedy struck, they were there for us. When we had cause for celebration, they celebrated with us. The town was safe for children. In the Summer when we had long days like

Scandinavian countries, you could have the children play for as late as 11:30 p.m. and not worry. We were all Catholics, and as long as we repented our sins, we were secure about our salvation.

James Dillon was elected leader of the party known as Fine Gael, I witnessed making a triumphant entrance into town. Coming from Dublin, up Barrack Street, he took his place on the stage set up on the Square. Like DeVelara he was surrounded by adoring fans who crowded the Square and filled the surrounding streets. I noticed marching on his side was Dominic Cryan, the manager of his forty-acre farm. His party defeated Dev's party, Fianna Fail, "Soldiers of Destiny", in the national elections. However, their success was short lived. They survived three years, and Dev and Fianna Fail continued to dominate for the rest of the century - and thereafter! Dillon continued as the opposition speaker and continued to enthrall both parties with his fiery speech.

Balla continues to be historic. Even as I write, the national newspapers carried the headlines, "Ballaghaderreen Accepts 80 Syrian Refugees." As I always keep contact with the hometown I became aware that while the majority of the city voted for it, the people of the town were evenly divided - pro and con. The refugees were housed in a modern hotel called "The Abbey Views Hotel" which was empty since the hotel declared bankruptcy.

## **The Beginning of Vocation**

When I was a child and my family's arrival in Balla, I was immediately signed up with the De La Salle Brothers. I must have felt awed by the new circumstances because I did poorly the first six months. I remember being asked to recite a poem (given as one assignment over the weekend) and I was tongue-tied and couldn't open my mouth. Brother Joseph called on another student. I was mad because I knew the poem entirely. I was thirteenth in my class of fifty. The next year I was fifth, and Brother Joseph gave me two apples instead of one for being fifth.

As soon as I signed up to be an altar server Vincent did, too. We had to buy our own surplices and cassocks. We had one set between us, but when it came to big occasions I insisted on being the one who served. What a jerk I was! The processions, ringing the bells, of consecration - all of it caused me to look with awe, as well as the crib when Christmas arrived. I was particularly interested with the black Wise Man. I didn't know how to do the Stations of the Cross, but I followed "Worm Flynn" around and all I could hear was "pist, pist, pist." So I went around the Stations of the Cross myself saying, "pist, pist, pist" at each station. I later found out what "Worm Flynn" was saying was "please send me a buyer for the house." I would attend the Holy Hour at the Cathedral, but found it totally boring, except for the Benediction at the end. I said to myself, "When I become a priest, I will find ways to make that Holy Hour more interesting."

I also saw the humanness of the priest. We had a curate who had a serious problem with the drink. He used to visit his friends, the Caseys across the street from us, before the Holy Hour and have a "snoot full" before he came to the Church. When giving the blessing of the people with the Monstrance, he always came close to falling either right or left. (He never did fall.) Incidentally he was the first priest we ever had at the Cathedral that visited all the homes. This dichotomy was to follow me all the way to the priesthood and beyond. I was always impressed with his homilies. They were so dramatic.

In grammar school I made no secret about my desire to be a priest, but in High School I never mentioned it. I wanted to be a part of everything - the dances, the dirty jokes. I noticed when any student proclaimed to become a priest that the other students would say, "Don't tell him that, he is going to be a priest." I didn't even tell my best friend, Barry Freyne, who was quite open about his intentions to be a priest. When I finally announced I was going away to the Seminary Barry called me and said, "You were so secretive about that for five years. I got only one hint that you

were thinking about the priesthood, and that was when Father Joe Higgins was guessing how many priests we would have in the class. He mentioned, 'Will we have one priest in the front row?' And that was obviously Barry Freyne.

I leaned over to Barry and said, "He discounts me because I took the Bank Exam." I took the exam in my fourth year in Nathy's. I said banking would be my very last choice of a career. My poor Dad paid for my bus trip up and down to Dublin for two nights stay at the Guest House in Upper Leeson Street and gave me money for meals or anything else I might want while in Dublin. I saw three movies during my two-day stay in Dublin. In fact I would take in a movie in one theater and walk out and enter another movie house. I saw all three movies, one after the other. I wasn't exhausted; I was rather charged up.

I loved the movies. My father offered me a watch if I would cut down my movie attendance from three to two a week between September and Christmas. I managed to do that for one month. It was too much and I said, "To heck with the watch, I'm going back to three movies a week." Then I wrote to my Aunt Rose in New York and told her I needed money for a watch. She promptly sent me the money, so I got the watch anyway! Wasn't it odd that I ended up in the movie capital of the world, Los Angeles?

## Coming of Age

Because I associated with other innocents, my earlier years were very innocent. My first knowledge came about in an unusual way. We used to go down to Leitrim in the Summer for two and a half months. To our great joy two brothers, Johnny and Kevin Barry (Yes, their father was a first cousin of the ill-fated Kevin Barry who became a hero of Irish Independence). "Just a lad of eighteen summers, that one can deny. As he walked to his death that morning proudly held his head up high. . . . saying, 'Why do they

not shoot me like a soldier, but hang me like a dog.’ Another hero for old Ireland; another murder for the crown.”

I guess I was fourteen or fifteen, Vincent was eleven or twelve, and we had two companions to go down to Lough Allen or climb the mountains behind us called Sleive on Iarann (or Mountains of Iron). Anyway we were joined by an older lad who was mentally challenged, and Johnny was teasing the young man. The subject was banshees, an elusive woman who would cry at night when someone died or was about to die. Anyway Johnny asked the retarded lad, what would he do if he met a banshee? “I would ride her,” said the lad. The Barry boys laughed. Later on I asked my brother, Vincent, what “riding the banshee” meant? My brother who read everything, told me it meant having sex with the banshee.

In the following days I plied my brother with questions, and that is how I learned about sex from my younger brother.

As I mentioned before I kept quiet about my Seminary plans because I wanted to go to the dances. There was an Irish teacher from the Tech (Technical School), Peadar Noone, who organized dances for us teenagers. I enjoyed dances and enjoyed the association with the girls. There was a girl called Betty Galvin who came to Balla every year to stay with her aunt for the Summer. Her father was a detective in Dublin. They said he was sending Betty and her younger brother down the country for safety reasons. As a detective he had “sent down” many a criminal, and there was always a danger that the criminals he “sent down” might harm his children.

Anyway Betty was awfully cute, and she took a shine to me and came down to our home as often as she could. I was flattered by the attention and amazed she ignored the boy across the street who considered himself “God’s gift to women.” He told funny stories, and the girls seemed to like him. So I was amazed the prettiest girl on our street was attracted to me. I told this story to an Irish lady, and she said, “that’s because she wanted something she couldn’t have.”

Vincent, although he was an extreme introvert was beginning to get interested in the ladies. One of his best friends was Dominic Brennan, an introvert like him. Vincent's greatest interest was in Dominic's sister, Koragh. Usually at about 2:30 p.m. we would cycle down to the town of Boyle sixteen miles by way of French Park. The shorter route to Boyle was by way of Lough Gara, but it also passed the Brennan home and farm. We would stop by and Mrs. Brennan always treated us to a meal or rather had us join in the family evening meal. Koragh was a radiant beauty at that time and often got her picture in the paper when attending the Galway races, but the romance went nowhere. She had a Kerry bank manager in her sights! Two things did come out of these visits. First, I became friends with Mrs. Brennan, a friendship that lasted until her death at ninety-two.

The second was that I was introduced to Joey Curran who was an assistant teacher with Mrs. Brennan. We were almost bonded that first day. Joey was from the town, Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim where both my Dad and Mother, and their families did their shopping. Naturally I looked her up as soon as I paid my annual visit to the Flanagan and Gallagher clans. We became great friends. Joey was very straight, very honest and lots of fun. You wouldn't know that she experienced some terrible tragedy some time before I met her. Her younger brother who attended University College in Dublin (UCD) was killed on a bicycle while riding to the college. The parents were devastated, and Joey's mother had a nervous breakdown, but Joey held the family together. I didn't know of all of this until later. You wouldn't have guessed all this tragedy from her happy disposition.

At the time I did something that I knew was risky. Joey had a scooter, and she would do the driving while I would ride behind her on the pillion. I would wear my black suit, white shirt and black tie. We took short trips together. That outfit identified me as a Seminarian. I am sure there was a lot of talk about the two of us, but the inevitable thing happened: I was reported to the Seminary.



As soon as I got back to the Seminary I was called to the Dean's room and there was the Dean, the Junior Dean, and our moral professor who was popularly called "Micky"(Carroll). He had a Doctorate of Theology. They produced a letter from an anonymous person. Mind you, I was treated far better than I expected. "Was it true?" I said, "Yes, but it was more a friendship." And then what must have been inspiration from on high I said, "Dr. Carroll, you were asked (always by way of a note), "Should we test our vocation during the Summer?" And your reply was, "Well, it's like testing a hurley (a hockey stick). You bend it several times to make it pliable, but you don't bend it so much that it breaks." I felt that Dr. Carroll suppressed a laugh. "Well, go outside and wait and we'll bring you back." About twenty minutes later, they called me back. They said, "Your actions were very imprudent and was a cause of some scandal - and that's serious. We will give you one more chance. But you will have to give up riding with the lady on a scooter and meet in circumstances that will not cause a scandal."

To my amazement I did not get a "cat."(that is a caveat). If you got three "cats" you would be fired. I felt that Dr. Carroll had stood up for me, and that he was a friend. I was right. I learned that on Sunday evening following Ordination. I must have exercised prudence because there was not another letter. Joey married a mechanic, Seamus Scally, from Boyle, and he proved to be a loving husband.

## **A Mother's Care**

Mother loved her two boys, but I got most of the attention and not because I had more charm than Vincent. It was because I was a sickly child. I grew up with bronchitis. I also had a session with the whooping cough. Emon Gallagher from across the street remembers (and I'm sure half the street remembers) hearing me coughing usually around midnight as my mother held me in bed and helped me get my breath. Because of her experience with the Haigs in White Plains, New York, she had learned a lot about

beating a sickness. She got me to take raw eggs and Vincent and I were treated to extract of maul with fish oil (we'd hand over the spoon to the cat who would lick the spoon feverously and fairly hammer the spoon against the cement floor.) As a result, I got the lion's share of mother's attention.

I liked sports, but had to give up all sports, even running in the fourth grade. Dad would shout at me, "You know Sean, you are not supposed to run." I had to stop anyway because I'd get too heated. I never engaged in sports again until I went to the Seminary. There was one glorious episode I had before I finally quit sports, and that was one of three most memorable events of my life at the brother's school. We had five different teams of football pretty much well divided. Our team reached the final. I was a goalie. The game was getting close to the end. We were two points ahead. All two teams were at the far end of the field. I was leaning against the pool when suddenly the captain of the other team, Seamus Callaghan, broke away from the two teams and came down the field, toe-to-hand, toe-to-hand. I was muttering to myself, "Where's that darn full back that should have been up at the other side of the field, but back in front of me and protecting me?" Anyway, Seamus reaching the 14-yard line and took a blazing shot. And I don't know how I did it, but I stopped the ball and quickly kicked it to the right side of the field. In less than a minute the final whistle blew, and we had won the game and won the tournament, as well.

The captain on our side, Seamie O'Donnell, received the cup on behalf of the team, and we all got medals. I never got more thumpin' on the back than I did when I saved the goal, representing three points. My reputation was really established on that one episode. Years late the older guys would say to me, "Flanagan, you used to be a good footballer. Ah, yes, you were a great goalie." I walked home that day, three feet off the ground, and my Dad was very proud.

That was my last football game and I didn't play the game again until I went to the Seminary in 1953. I was confined to walking the floppy dog

belonging to the hair dresser next door (of dubious extraction) across the bogs, and I turned to reading everything, going to movies, and became delighted to go to my own world of vivid imagination. I identified with Danny Kaye in the movie, “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty.”

My parents were indulgent though Dad was a fearless policeman. He was soft when it came to his boys. Mother found it almost impossible to impose any kind of punishment, and I pushed them to the limit! I remember there was something that provoked me, and I decided to run away. It was Summer, and my parents, at first, were not unduly alarmed. It got to 11:30 p.m., and they alerted the neighbors and a search party was organized. They carried lanterns and spread out in ever increasing size. In awhile I eluded the search party and even returned to the backyard. I got up to the second floor, then back outside just as my mother entered my bedroom. She turned on the light, saw the empty bed, and burst into tears. I said to myself, “Good! I am being properly missed.” It sort of reminded me of Huckleberry Finn who returned to watch his own funeral. Eventually I got too close to the search party, and they found me behind the gate. They quickly took me back to my parents. They were so relieved that they just sent me to bed.

The next day at school during the morning break, the fourth graders surrounded me and wanted to know what happened. They formed a semi-circle around me, and I knew I had a captive audience. I told them I had been captured by a gang, locked away, and tied up before they left. After a struggle, I was able to loosen the bands and climbed up by way of a stove and up through a hole in the roof. Then I ran until I reached Ballaghaderreen. They were in awe, and I had the undivided attention for twenty-five minutes of recess. I often wonder if my love of preaching came from that experience. What I did to my parents, and what impression the neighbors must have had about what caused me to run away from home never occurred to me. My parents couldn’t have been more loving. I often asked myself in later years, what was wrong with me that I would do such a thing. I got some

answers to that through the Twelve Step Program. But some things remain a mystery, to be known only in the mind of God.

## Life Changes Forever

The event that was the greatest impact in my life happened when I was 10-1/2 years old, and my brother, Vincent, was 8-1/2. The year was 1946, and my mother had just turned 39 on her birthday, December 17, 1945. Dad took a week off and chose to go down to check on the farm mother had inherited in Comaleck, in the Parish of Kiltubrid. The farm had been neglected for many years, and Dad went to the hinterland of the 40 acre land which was half meadowland and half bog. He was fixing fencing gates, repairing wire fences, closing gaps with appropriately sized bushes, etc.

On Monday mother caught a cold, and what was unusual for her, she took to the bed. I used to bring her tea and toast; that was all she wanted. Nurse Galvin who lived three doors up from the house, asked me, "I haven't seen your mother going to Mass the last few days." Mother attended Mass daily. "Is she sick?" I told her, "She caught a cold and is staying in bed." Nurse Galvin who was Visiting Ballagh said, "I'll come to see her," and she followed through on her promise. She came to the bedroom upstairs. I followed her up, and she said, "Leave us alone. I want to examine her," and she did. When she went to turn her over, she found that mother turned black and blue. Nurse Galvin knew it was serious; it was pneumonia.

Of all the weeks, the Dispensary doctor was away for the week, and when he got back on Sunday, it was all over. I went upstairs, and mother had tubes coming out of her mouth, nose, and ears. She managed to speak to me and told me to go back downstairs, sit in the sitting room and wait until my brother came home from the pantomime. I went down and sat quietly on the sofa, kind of numbed. A little while later, a few of the neighbors came down. I remember Mrs. McGovern, mother's best friend, was one of them. She said, "You better pray for your mother; she is very ill."

I said, "I know, and she is going to die." They were somewhat startled by my answer. A little while later after Father McVann anointed her, they told me my mother was dead. When Vincent arrived home from the pantomime, I blurted out, "Marmie is dead." It answered a small item that puzzled him because Father McVann had asked in the hall, "which of those boys is Flanagan?" Mother died January 13, 1946.

Kathleen O'Donnell Hunt wrote an article for the town newspaper beginning, "You can imagine us coming out of the pantomime to be told that the young Mrs. Flanagan died leaving behind two little boys. . . ." I read the article to Vincent over the phone, and he gritted his teeth and said, "Yes, and nobody thought to tell me my mother was dead, until you blurted it out when I came through the front door. "Of all times, Dad got a few days off from the police department and went down to Leitrim to check on the farm at Moylullen. He had no phone and it wasn't until Sunday that the local Guards were able to contact him. Dad arrived shortly before Father McVann anointed mother. She was waked in the house before the body was brought to the Cathedral. Dad had to protect us, as much as he could. The bank manager down the street, Mr. Peter McLoughlin, offered to keep us while the Wake continued through the night to the next morning. We walked to the Cathedral and merged with the entire body of students on their way up the avenue to the Church. Not knowing what to say, I asked one of the older lads why they were coming to Mass? One of them said, "Oh Brother Casian, (the head brother) was in good form, and he let us all come to Mass." We joined Dad and his good friend, Paddy Freyne in the front pew.

Dad chose to have mother buried with her own family in Kiltubrid, some 35 miles away from Ballaghaderreen. Again, Dad wanting to spare us children, arranged with Mrs. Doyle, who had a bar down from the cemetery, to have us given cake while the burial took place. He must have had a stressful time following mother's death. He wrote mother's sisters asking them to

come and take care of us. They said they couldn't do it, and as I reflect on it, Dad's plea with them was unrealistic. Aunt Lizzie Carran, a nurse, was in charge of a floor in a hospital. She had lost her daughter tragically and wanted to adopt us. She promised she would give the farm when we were of age. My Dad used to point up to the Curran land, still very much neglected and say, "Imagine you and Vincent could be working on that twenty-two-acre farm."

Mom's sister, Alice, was married in Birmingham; Nellie was married in Leitrim and had one son at this stage. On the positive side Aunt Rose in the Bronx wanted to adopt us, since she had no children of her own. Then Dad turned to the Flanagan side of the family, and they bound around him and parceled us out to three aunts and one aunt-in-law until he could decide what to do. The one thing he didn't want to do was to give us up. I was always grateful for that, but I had sympathy for the children who were given up for adoption. My brother, Vincent, was of a quiet nature. I was not! I was a pure hellion, but Vincent always followed my lead. They tried separating us for a couple of weeks. I cried my eyes out - so much, they thought I could get ill. So for better or worse, they put us back together again.

We went to Aunt Katie's who had one son about eight years older than me. He had a temper and I knew how to provoke him. I would needle him until he couldn't take it anymore. He would jump up and come after us. We would get through a hole in the bushes, and off through the fields, but usually Aunt Katie would get between him and the front door and plead with him saying, "Oh they are only little orphans." Aunt Katie would always calm him down, and we would return when I thought the time was right. Peace would reign until I would provoke him, poor Sonny, all over again. Sonny, or Francis, was a very decent chap, and we became friends in later years. But the term, "dear little orphans," gave me an idea. When the teacher at Cormongan School gave us a long poem to learn, I told her, "I can't do that, I'm an orphan," and she went along!

After six months Dad got the answer. He persuaded his niece, Kathleen Reynolds to give up her job in the jam factory, and she came to take care of us. He offered her more money than she was getting at the factory, and I believe that she helped her mother when she became a widow. It must have been a sacrifice for Kathleen's mother, Aunt Bea, because she leaned on Kathleen a lot, when she went through her traumas. My life was changed dramatically.

Before I launch the story of my life with my cousin, Kathleen, there was an episode that affected me for many years. Very early on with Kathleen and shortly after my mother's death, I came home and said, "Mrs. McGovern asked me if I missed my mother. Before I could even think about an answer Kathleen said, "Of course you miss your mother. What a ridiculous question to ask a young child." What I wasn't able to say was that I went stone cold emotionally, and I wasn't able to tell anyone for many years. I used to think, "What kind of monster am I." As well as that I didn't trust anyone, even God, after the sudden death of my mother. I had lots of friends, and some that got close to me, but I didn't let them get close to me. Likewise I had families who adopted me and made me one of the family, but when I moved from one parish to another, I got caught up with the new crowd and didn't call back to the old friends and families. When they showed up at the new parish, I was genuinely glad to see them. One nun said to me, "Sean, you are very existential."

One Thanksgiving I spent with the Hunts in West Covina. Kathleen Hunt was the one who wrote the article about the death of my mother at an early age. She got back to that subject again, and asked me how did I even manage to deal with it as a ten-and-a-half-year-old child?

"Actually I said I went kind of numb and it has taken me years to allow myself to feel the feelings." Even as I spoke I became aware of a young man at the far end of the table listening to me with intense interest. He was fourteen years of age and had just lost his father the week before.

The very next morning I got a call from Kathleen who said the young man wanted to see me. I drove out to West Covina and spent a couple of hours with the young man. He made me re-tell every detail about my reaction to my mother's death. I did to the best of my ability, and essentially told him the mistake I made was not telling anybody what was going on inside of me.

Coming away I felt I had helped the young lad and I discovered something in reaching out to the young lad, I helped myself quite a bit.

After that at funerals, I would observe young people and their reactions. I was especially interested in the ones who were too quiet. I would do for them what Brother Gregory did for me after the passing of my mother. I would go to the quiet one, put my arm around his shoulder and say, "Are you alright?" and then chuck under their chin and say, "You are going to be alright." It was a simple gesture, but I felt it helped the young man. Thus it was that I was the best helper for the wounded one who is wounded himself!

## **Helen Keller vs. Annie Sullivan**

Kathleen Reynolds came into our home a month after my 11th birthday. Kathleen was 10 years older, a young healthy female. As I mentioned already. I was pure hellion- very much in need of discipline. I was spoiled rotten by both my mother and my dad. When I saw the movie, "The Miracle Worker" with Patti Duke as Helen, and Ann Bancroft as Annie Sullivan, I realized that I was like Helen with aristocratic Southern parents who were like my parents very indulgent. Helen ate food like a young savage, and had a temper that would become a rage when she wouldn't get what she wanted. Her parents wouldn't raise a hand against her. She was totally out of control. The parents would bring in many different nannies and case workers, all to no avail. Finally they heard of Annie Sullivan who had great success in very difficult cases - and, she was half-blind herself.



I say all this because the story resembles my own story. Only the names were changed from Helen Keller vs. Annie Sullivan to Sean Flanagan vs. Kathleen Reynolds. For 3-1/2 years I battled Kathleen, and I lost every battle. My Dad was gone a lot with police duties, and Kathleen was completely in charge. She did a good job with me. Vincent opposed her once and got disciplined. Even in his early days, Vincent was quite shrewd and usually kept his mouth shut. I never knew how to keep my mouth shut and got into trouble frequently. I have to be fair to Kathleen; she came from a tragic background and did the best she could. When she left, she left behind two little gentlemen. Only one episode could I fault Kathleen. She asked me to do something in the morning, and I refused. I can't remember what it was or whether it was reasonable or not. But I refused and she said, "You will not get another bite until you do it." All day long I visited some hiding places in the woods, in the bog, down the railway line, etc. I got hungrier and hungrier, and finally at 9:00 at night, I couldn't take it anymore, and I came back and apologized. I was given good, warm food. I was totally humiliated. Years later when I shared that story at a seminar called "Personality and Human Relation," the nun in charge said, "Oh my God! No wonder our Sisters have problems with their pastors." I don't know that it affected my relation with women, although my sister-in-law accused me of being a misogynist. I laughed at the time, but I had to take a look at it.

I had resentment for several years, but realized I had to get rid of the resentment. I did. What helped greatly was that I came to know what suffering Kathleen had endured even before she got to us. She was the 3rd child of four children. The father, Dennis, was at a fair in Drumshambo when a bull got loose and trapped Dennis in a blind alley. The bull charged him and smashed four of his ribs. Three were repaired, but the 4th was beyond repair. He was carried home on a litter and brought up to his bed where he lay until his death 6 months later. He left his wife, Beatrice – Aunt Bea – with four children – 11-1/2 to a baby of 4 1/2 . On top of that Bea entered an ill-fated marriage which never got off the ground. They sepa-

rated. Short-lived as it was, it was a disaster because she lost her widow's pension. They lived off the products of the farm and eggs they sold to a traveling salesman. Not unexpectedly, she had a nervous breakdown. When she would have a panic attack, she would rouse Kathleen and say, "We have to see your Aunt Lizzie." And Lizzie had a remarkable ability to sooth Bea, and "put her back together again."

## **The Humanness of the Priest**

1948 was the year I started high school in Ireland Secondary School called St. Nathy's College. From the beginning to the end I was a "day pupil" since I lived on Barrack Street and then on Main Street which was only a short distance to walk. I was put into "B" class. For two years I came either 1st or 2nd in the class, and then came to realize I didn't have to push myself and became lazy. I made sure to shine in History or Greek because those were classes taught by Reverend Larry Mc Gettrick. The only one who realized I was not delivering up to my potential was the Father Joe Higgins, and he said as much. He said to me, "You are not delivering what you are capable of." But since there were no aptitude tests, I was left to float for the three final years. Father Tom Lynch noticed I had a flair for English and for writing. He often took my essays and read parts to other classes to show my ability of observing and describing what I saw and heard.

So my three final years were easy. All but one of our teachers were diocesan priests. We had only one lay teacher, Seamus. ( I never had him in my class room.) For the most part, they were pretty good priests. I was lucky to have the best President Nathy's ever had, Father (later Canon) James Colleran nicknamed "Junny." He came aboard at Christmas in 1948. He was always calm and unruffled even in the midst of a crises. What amused me was that like Dad, the only movies he ever watched were by "Laurel and Hardy." The result was that we got to see every last movie ever made with "Laurel and Hardy!" Another man that we were blessed with was Father

James O'Hara. He taught religion and told stories from his days in Los Angeles to color his religion classes. One time he said spontaneously, "Those prisons in Los Angeles were terrible. I know because I was in them. (He was never a prisoner, but was still near a prisoner in jail when asked to explain.)

I was once coming back from lunch somewhat late, through no fault of my own, when I opened the front door of the College and he happened to just be inside the door. I burst into tears. He said, "It's alright. I know you rarely come late." And then he checked me under the chin, patted me on the face and sent me happily on my way to the assigned classroom. He told my Dad one time, "I really like your two boys. In fact they are my favorites, but I can't say that publicly because the others would be jealous." I don't know whether he said that to other parents, but from that time onward, I adored that man.

When he returned to the College from Los Angeles, he was immediately made Deacon (the worst job in the college). Having been away from Ireland for ten years, or more, he had no knowledge of Irish football. He had observed the coaches, like the Rams, and he got hold of a megaphone and ran up and down the sidelines shouting encouragements to one side or another. And yet it worked! For twenty years Nathy's always got beaten in the final of the Province by St. Jarlath's of Tuam, a much bigger school than Nathy's. Suddenly Nathy's toppled Jarlath's in the final. Later they went on to win the All-Ireland which existed for only a few years.

I had heard about an occasional ogre among the teachers. One or two were positively sadistic and shouldn't have been in teaching. All, but one, had teaching degrees, and the Bishop put them in teaching. The most popular priest ever was a Father "Tom" Veeseey. He was educated in Salamanca, Spain, but had no degrees at all, and the diocese could not get a salary from him. Father Veeseey used to entertain us or color his classes by telling us

about the bullfights in Spain. “The bullfights were very reasonable, but you had to pay more than a shale.”

What impressed and assuaged me was the humanness of the priests. We knew that Father T. had a “weakness for the drop.” Normally he was charming and entertaining, but we would spot that he had a sorehead and was “in a bad tip!” (I think of a time from “Oliver.” (And how the boding tremblors learn to trace the day’s disaster in “his morning face”)

We knew that Father W. and Father F. were not getting along, and the students learned to exploit the ritual con. One day Father W. brought Father a fifteen decade rosary. You couldn’t hold it without dragging on the ground. The next class Father F. came in, and we told him about the long rosary. He replied with some malice, “Did you ever hear the old Irish saying ‘Tha pardirin fada as Rogara.’ (A chief carries a long rosary)”

Well the boys, little, little devils that they were, wrote it up on the blackboard, and the next class was Father W. He saw the saying and laughed until he found out who said it. His face flushed up; he sped out the door, and hammered at Father F’s room. Father F. came out and his face turned white. There was a heated exchange, but finally Father F. returned to our classroom.

We knew that Father H. liked to associate with the rich and famous. He was a frequent guest at the home of James Dillon even when he was Prime Minister. We called him “Tolly, olly.”

Father L., our English teacher, was mad on sports. So they diverted him from his subject by saying, “That was a great game last Sunday between Mayo and Roscommon.” And he was off and running. For half an hour he discussed the weaknesses and strengths of both teams. Then he would remember he had a class to give. The amazing thing was that he would pack as much into the last 15 minutes, as another teacher would in an hour and a half.

But there were great priests. The diocese got their salary from the government. They were given a stipend which enabled them to take a trip through Europe in the summer vacation. They had no cars. One had a motorcycle. Their humanness was very re-assuring to me as I laid my plans to go forward into the priest hood.

## The Seminary Days

1953 was an eventful year for me, Dad and the family. It was the year I went to the Seminary, and the year Dad retired from the Police Department. As I have previously mentioned, I kept my desire to be a priest “close to the cuff.” I didn’t let Dad send me up to Dublin to do the Bank Examination and pay all the expenses, when I had no intention of becoming a bank clerk. Toward the middle of June, I went to Finner Camp near the sea-side resort of Bundoran. For my last three years in Nathy’s, I belonged to the Army reserve called the L.D.F. or Local Defense Forces. I got to handle a .33 rifle, learned to toss a grenade, do barrack duty as a sentry at the front entrance, do maneuvers, drills, marches, etc. We also got 20 pounds for attending meetings during the year and 10 pounds for the two weeks of training. That was a lot of money in those days, and Dad allowed me to keep it all!

Well I knew the time had come to declare my wish to go to the Seminary. As soon as I arrived home I asked Mom, “Where’s Dad?” He’s out in the Carne’s field digging potatoes. I got there and followed Dad down the furrow. I said, “Dad I have something to tell you.” He said, “What son?” I said, “I want to go to the Seminary.” At first he thought I was kidding, but then he realized I was serious. And still leaning on the shovel, he said, “Well there is nothing that would make me more happy than have a son, a priest.” And he added, “ You know your cousin, John Walsh, is training to be a Maryknoll Priest in New York. Your cousin, Ann Marie is planning to become a Mercy nun and I have a cousin, a priest. Tom Flanagan who is a

priest in Chicago (he wasn't in Chicago, but in St. Louis, Missouri). And your Mom is a great favorite of Bishop O'Rourke who is in charge of a diocese in Lagos, Nigeria. He belongs to a religious order called The Society of African Missions in Nigeria or S.M.A.s. (Mother wasn't actually a blood relative of the Bishop). Her mother was Maria Conifrey. Mrs. Conifrey was married twice. The first husband was an O'Rourke. There were two boys of that marriage - the Bishop and his brother, Pee O'Rourke who was mentally challenged. There was an extraordinary bond between the Gallaghers and the O'Rourkes.

Anyway the word was out. Dad wrote all directions about me and telling the good news after I came back from Finner Camp near the infamous town of Bundoran. My Aunt Lizzie Gallagher, who always had a vivid imagination said, "I know what happened. Sean saw all the debauchery in Bundoran and decided he had to do something toward the reform of that Sodom and Gomorrah." It was totally untrue, but I loved it. Kathleen Reynolds in New York was frankly incredulous. When told about my decision, she said, "Oh you got that wrong. It's Vincent who is going to the Seminary not Sean." It took a lot of convincing before she accepted the idea that the rascalion who gave her so much trouble was now headed to the sacred priesthood.

But Dad had to act quickly. We had to buy a black suit, white shirt and tie, as well as a black soutane (cassock), and a Foxford rug. A few days before I left for the Seminary, I went into the front sitting room, and there were all those items laid out on the sitting room furniture. And just at that moment the prettiest girl in town, Mary Keene, passed by the window. I felt trapped, but I couldn't turn back at this stage! I said, "Well I'll go down for a year until the soutane is worn out - and then I'll quit."

My Dad came to my rescue. We had a chance to have some private time together. He looked directly into my face and said, "Sean, I want you to know that while we would be very honored to have a priest in the family, the most important thing is that we want you to be happy. If you ever, ever

feel that the priestly life is not for you, just go directly to the phone, let us know, and we will come and get you.” And those few words from Dad, gave me an enormous sense of freedom.

I have mentioned that 1953 was the year I entered the Seminary. It was also the year Dad retired from the Guards. It was not a joyful event. Dad always had a knack of getting along with people in high places. He got a call from a friend in headquarters in Dublin who said, “Joe, have you quit giving out citations?”

Dad said, “No.”

“Well, none of your citations have been sent into the office. Let me check.” He did and called back. “Joe, all your citations for the past year have not been processed from the station in Castlerea. (Castlerea had precedents over the station in Ballaghaderreen.) “Joe, there is obviously some shenanigans going on, and there is collusion between the crowd in Ballaghaderreen and the one in Castlerea. If you want to bring charges I will certainly back you up.”

My Dad said, “No, I don’t want to do it at this time.” (I was to discover later why Dad did not bring charges at that time.)

Following this disclosure the Superintendent in Castlerea suggested (or even directed that Dad move to the village of Curraboy. He was given no choice. Years later we were driving around North Roscommon and Dad asked me if I would drive a few miles out of my way to see the village of Curraboy. It had a church, pub, a grocery store and nothing much more. Dad said more to himself, “So this is where they wanted to send me.” The upshot was that Dad decided to retire rather than go through the change. You could retire with full pension after thirty years of service. Dad had thirty-one years of service. The pension was based on 2/3 of the pay. You could opt to take a lump sum and accept one third of your working salary.

Dad chose the later, and so he started to live on one-third of his consisting pay.

It wasn't very much. I do believe something like ten pounds a week. I asked Dad later, "How were you able to live on ten pounds a week?"

He said, "Well, we had the garden or gardens (he worked three) and your Mom was a thrifty lady who knew how to make do with what we had. And, I used to sell vegetables to Nonny O'Donnell down the street."

Not too long after that the government realized what an enormous debt they owed to the police who were first to serve the newly established "Free State." They chose to be an unarmed police force at the time when a Civil War was raging. All the old timers had their full pension restored, and Mom and Dad lived comfortably after that!

Only after I was ordained did Dad tell me why he didn't press charges way back in 1953. He was afraid the whole court case, which would reach the newspapers, would affect my continuance in the Seminary!

## **A New Mother**

I have to back-track a little. My cousin, Kathleen, took care of us for three-and-a-half years. Myself and herself made peace and in the end achieved a rather good relationship. In one way we had the best of both worlds - 9-1/2 months in the town and 2-1/2 months in the country. In the country we hooked up with Johnny and Kevin Barry. We roamed the no man's land below Slieve and Iariann, swam in Lough Allen, and took in an occasional movie at Pat Doherty's Hall in Drumshanbo.

It always amused me that when we would return to Ballaghaderreen, there would be so many cans in the trash. (Dad made do with canned food and bottles of Guinness. In the last two years in Saint Nathy's I became a close friend of Barry Freyne. After study at 9:00 p.m., I would walk him out behind the cemetery and sometimes back into Ballaghaderreen. Barry, like



me, was quite the story teller. At this time Barry's father was dead, but the company he owned was thriving, selling new clothes in the square, and in several towns around North Roscommon. Some of the sons were involved in overseeing the company.

One night Barry revealed something that disturbed me. He said, "Do you know that your father is going to get married again?"

No I didn't; and of all things it was to a neighbor of Freyne's called Winnie Freyne. Her brother, Paddy, was a great friend of Dad's, and what bonded them was that they shared the same political views. (Although Dad was quite moderate in his views.) Paddy in his young days was a passionate "Blue Shirter." The Blue Shirts were a radical wing of the Fine Gael Party who were supporters of General Franco in Spain in his fight for mastery in Spain's Civil War. Paddy, I had heard, rode a white horse with a blue shirt and blue pants through the villages of Tobracken and Curry. The Blue Shirter's were led by General Duffy who organized the very successful Religious Congress of 1932. The Guards, by the way, were not allowed to vote - as a way of indicating their neutrality. But Paddy and Winnie Freyne were highly respectable people. My father got me alone in my bedroom and said, "I have something to tell, Sean. I thinking of getting married again." I burst into tears. I promptly went back to my room and sat on the bed - thinking I must have been given a special illumination of grace because I got up and went back to Dad's bedroom and said, "Dad, I am not against you getting married again. What has upset me is that I had to hear of your marriage plans from some one other than you. And when are we going to meet the lady?" He said, "Sean, That can easily be arranged, and would you let your brother know all this?"

So we met the lady who was to be our second mother. In their home in Tobracken, Paddy was there along with his new wife we called Catherine White. We had a wonderful evening meal and then played cards. Winnie, a little lady, was quite shy. They were married at a quiet ceremony at the

Cathedral while we were sent to Kathleen's mother, our Aunt Bea. Winnie was to be in our lives for 43 year and proved to be a real treasure. Before she met Dad, she had never traveled more than three miles from her home. She told me as kids their big excitement was for a bunch of girls to walk across the fields and go three miles to see the Bishop's Palace three miles away. They would sit at the top of the hill overlooking the Bishop's Palace, have a great gab fest, and then return home for the evening meal. Later I tried to imagine what it must have been like to come into a house with two teenagers. What helped was that we had been well-trained by our cousin, Kathleen.

Fast forward to the year of 1966 when Vincent finally (at 29) decided to marry. He married an English lady, Ann Elizabeth Harris, who worked with him in the same laboratory at Cambridge College in England. She was the daughter of the chancellor of Bristol University. Professor Harris (as he was always called) arranged for a marriage reception at the plushest hotel in Bristol. At the reception to my dismay, I got separated from my little mother. She was seated at the far end of the dais surrounded by friends of Ann Harris from Cambridge. I looked up toward the end of the long table to see how mother was getting along. She seemed to be quite cheerful in the midst of her august intellectual company.

Well, when the dinner was hardly over, a bunch of them came down hastily to me and said, "Your mother is an absolute dawlin'." Apparently mother with a few glasses of wine regaled them with stories about her village in Ireland. I never worried again about her meeting any group of people. The country people are so authentic and real.

By this time I was in the Seminary called St. Kieran's in the historic city of Kilkenny. St. Kieran's was one of six Seminaries in Ireland that prepared priests for "the English speaking world outside of Ireland." There was one seminary for the home diocese, Maynooth, fifteen miles from the center of Dublin. I chose St. Kieran's for two reasons. (1) They taught all the subjects

in English rather than Latin, as the older seminaries did. (2) I was told you could choose your own diocese. I had spent my summers with the marvelous Doherty family in Crenane, two miles from Ballagh. Dominic, the father, was engaged in market gardening and sold vegetables in Ballagh. He was a very humble man. His wife was the very motherly type, who cooked wonderful meals even though she was battling arthritis from hands, feet, and back.

I was immersed in all aspects of farming - saving hay, burrowing, plowing, and laying cement paths once in awhile. By this time I was as strong as a horse with boundless energy and old Dominic, who was also bent over with arthritis, welcomed the help and needed it. He also gave me one pound every week which was a good bit of money at that time.

They had four grown children, Eugene, Mary, Agnes, and Dominic, the youngest. Dom never engaged in any farm work, but he was much loved by everyone he came in contact with. He was three years older than me, and went to St. Kieran's three years before I did. He was slated to go to the diocese of Southwark which encompassed the garden counties of Surrey, Sussex and Kent in England and London, South of the Thames. I, too, wanted to go the Southwark diocese. A strange thing I heard was that Monsignor Pat Dignan was home for a month from Los Angeles. We bought our milk from his brother, Michael, so we were quite familiar with all of the Dignan family. I cycled out to the Dignan farm. (1/2 mile from the town) and overheard from the Monsignor in the parlor, that if I wanted to go to Los Angeles, Monsignor Pat was a poor choice. All he could say was, "Ah they are wonderful, wonderful people."

We had to choose our diocese by the end of November. The dioceses were asked to pay 80% of the tuition and the other 20% by one's own family. By this time, too, I had to go to know the colorful John Anthony Sheahan. We met first day in the Seminary. His dad, Tom Sheahan, was also in the Guards, except he was a Sergeant of Weights and Measures, a rank

quite a bit higher than Dad's. However, they both knew each other. John was the first student I met, and it was more than a coincidence that we were assigned to the same desk for that first year.

John was advised by his doctor to choose a warm climate for the sake of his chest conditions. He had a cousin in Boston who sent him a list of all the major cities in the USA along with the average temperatures. He studied the chart well for couple of months, and then declared he was going to Southern California or South Florida. He knew Monsignor Bambridge, pastor of the Our Lady of Malibu in Malibu. He would say to me, "Why are you going to that awful England? Why don't you come to Los Angeles with me?" I used laugh and made no comment, but going up the stairs to see the Dean. "I changed my mind," I told him. "I want to go to Los Angeles." He asked me why? "Well I know so many priests there already. I knew Father Tom Glynn and his brother, Father Seamus Glynn. I know about the Gallagher brothers - Father Dan and Father Jim Gallagher." (Actually what I didn't know was there were 80 priests from the Achonry Diocese in L A . Achonry was my diocese with Ballagh as the Cathedral City. My brother, Vincent, who had an extraordinary ability to absorb details on almost everything told me, " Do you know there are more priests from Achonry diocese in L A . than there are in Achonry itself?" (78 in Achonry, 80 in L A . )

Anyway, I got the L A . diocese to the great joy of John Sheahan and the great disappointment of Dom Doherty. My friendship with John Sheahan was to last a lifetime. (He passed away on June 26, 2015 at 79 years of age.)

## **The Seminary Years**

The Seminary Years, like any other era of life, had its ups and downs. First I missed mother's cooking. The food in the Seminary was atrocious- even though the diocese of Ossory had the best Kilkenny land a mile or two outside the city. The City had a population of 15,000. "Life is what you make it." We had a 4:00 p.m. tea and ordinary bread and a print of butter.

A print was about the size of two Kennedy dollars pressed together. We were given two prints. I used to reserve a whole print for the fourth slice with so much great joy that my classmates and desk-mate, Ollie Mahedy became aware of my ECSTASY! In fairness to the authorities, you could get a replacement of the print if it wasn't the proper thickness. (One-way the students called this version, a misprint?)

The subjects for the first two years (called the Philosophy) were beyond a doubt the dullest subjects I had ever come across - ontology, epistemology, logic, and psychology.(not anything to do with modern psychology - more medieval) The redeeming subject was Scriptures (Bible Study) and Church history. We often asked ourselves about the usefulness of these subjects and our conclusion was that it was meant to improve discipline. The older students in the four years of theology told us to hang in there; that it would be more interesting when we got to theology which caused students to say that philosophy was a place "where some souls suffered for a time before going to theology." I bore with these subjects and must have done pretty well from an academic perspective. I was also very lucky to get re- acquainted with Superintendent Reynolds and Sergeant Taylor who Dad served with in Wicklow. When we had holidays one or the other would have me at their houses for dinner. The Super also had a daughter, a nun in the convent in Loughlynn where Tom Glynn's two sisters, Nuala and Cora also were trained as missionary sisters. Mrs. Reynolds also had an aunt in Bal-laghadarreen called Mrs. Mahon.

Tragically the Reynolds nun died in Quetta, India. (They named the house after the city she died in.)

Mrs. Taylor and her sister, Mrs. Quirke, lived in the same terrace and were sisters of a colorful Monsignor in Los Angeles, Monsignor Maurice Day. (Coincidence? or God's acting anonymously!)

The six years went very rapidly. I had no great difficulty with the subjects. I loved Church history. I came to love a subject called Dogmatic The-

ology. It was a defense of the Catholic teaching based on arguments from reason (mostly following its process provided by St. Thomas Aquinas) I was kind of prepared for it by Canon Sheahan's "Apologetics" that we had at St. Nathy's.

I had lots of questions. (You sent up notes to the professors, and they would have answers/comments the following day. Most of my questions got answered, and by the end of my third year in Theology, I ended up with a great respect for the reasonableness of Catholic Theology. I had a few more questions going into the third year of Theology, but I had a confidence that those questions would be answered, too. I made a 'Leap of Faith' for the remnant.

As I mentioned before, I never wanted to be anything, but becoming a priest. That did not mean there weren't periods when I would "get into myself" and think about calling Dad and saying, "Come and get me." I had a classmate, Dave Regan from Croome, County Limerick, who sat within an arms length away from me in Study Hall. He had an uncanny instinct to know I was in one of those moods, and like Brother Gregory, he would approach me and say, "Flan, what is going on?" I usually wouldn't know what was going on, but the very fact that he showed interest in me was enough for me to get out of the doldrums or whatever was bothering me. I often thought what a great friend he would be if we were in the same diocese where Dominic Doherty was also designated. (Dave and I met a few times in Ireland when we were both priests. When Dominic died at 44, Dave came to Ballagh for the funeral. He spent the whole day with me before he returned to Croome.

But generally I was a fairly happy-go-lucky student. I really was a "gallery man" and loved to get the students laughing. I remember we were in the library when we got word that we weren't going to have the movie that night which had been scheduled. I got up on the table and started to preach revolution. Suddenly the Dean walked in and signaled me to get

down and that he wanted me to follow him to his room. “What were you doing on the library table?”

I said, “I wanted to get the lads out of the doldrums when they heard there was not to be a movie that night.

“And what were you saying when I walked in?”

Now I was aware that the Dean was a fierce Republican and sympathetic to the IRA. “Now where were you in 1916?” Well it worked and he dismissed me, but added a warning, “The next time you preach from the top of a table, it will be in your own home.”

But I can’t imagine that I took a risk that would endanger my advance to the priesthood. Most of the guys would have some scruples on the road to the priesthood - especially as they took the steps that advanced one to ordination such as Tonsure, Minor Orders, and Subdiaconate. When we took a vow of celibacy and vow to read the Breviary daily, some had terrible scruples at that time. But they still made the decision to go forward. I didn’t. By the time fourth divinity rolled around, I was ready.

## **Mother Mary Comes Through for Me**

Fourth divinity was the last year. It began in September of 1958 and was to conclude on June 6th. I had a thought, “You know I was baptized in May; First Communion was in May; and Confirmation was in May. Wouldn’t it be nice if I was Ordained in May?” The thought was very persistent, and finally I went to the statue of Mary in the seminary chapel. I said to her, “I want to be Ordained in May. You are my patron now. You take care of that for me.”

Well, when we came back after the Christmas break, the President, Dr. Watty Dunphy, brought us Fourth Divines into the Seminary chapel and told us, “The government has announced that the Leaving Exams are going to be a week earlier. (The High School was attached to the seminary, but

remarkably separate.) So we have to evacuate the Seminary a week earlier. So the ordinations will be on May 31st instead of June 6th.” That was the only time that change was ever made in 200 years of our seminary history.

I sat there not at all surprised. The Blessed Mother was my patron. I told her what I wanted. She did what a patron should do. As St. Bernard said, “Never was it known that anyone who fled to her, and sought her intercession, was left unaided.” May 31st that year was the feast of Mary, Queen of Angels and Saints. (After which Los Angeles was called!)

Our final year was also an extraordinary year in the Church. During that year Pope Pius XII died, and the Cardinals chose a man in his 80s to be the next Pope, Guiseppe Roncali who took the name John XXIII. The word was that they chose a man who wouldn’t live long and would be an interim Pope who would do until they could find a more permanent choice. If that was true they sure made a mistake. John XXIII was to call an Ecumenical Council within two years, and the Church has never been the same since. If the Cardinals could see ahead they might have been unnerved. I often imagined the Holy Spirit saying the words of Betty Davis in the movie, *All About Eve*. She said, “Fasten your seatbelts; it is going to be a bumpy journey.”

A very strange thing happened in that final week before Ordination. The twenty of us were sitting at desks scattered throughout that huge Study Hall, reflecting on a talk given to us by a Redemptorist priest. When suddenly the doors to the Study Hall were thrown open, and the Dean, Father Gabriel Loughery came through the doors and was perplexed in looking mildly distracted. He said, “I forgot to get you to take the oath against modernism. But it is okay. All you have to do is put your hand over your heart and repeat the pledge after me!” And we complied, and it was taken care of in five minutes.

I said to Dave Regan, “What in the name of God was that about?” And Dave said, “I believe it goes back to the time of Pope Pius X when the



Church was worried about scientific theories replacing the traditional Catholic teachings.”

I was to learn more about that years later. It was a blot on Pope St. Pius X. He was the one who reduced the age for First Communion from thirteen to seven years, the age of reason. It was a practice rapidly adopted by the whole Church, and the sight of little boys and girls parading into the Church in their white outfits became the envy of most Christian Churches. Pius X tried desperately to prevent the outbreak of the First World War, but failed hopelessly. He died that year, 1914, and it was said he died of a broken heart.

He also came from poor peasant farmers and declared, “I was born poor; I have lived poor, and I will die poor.” There was much to admire about St. Pius, but the followers of the move against Modernism were extreme. The effects of the movement remained up to the coming of the Vatican II Council. As far as I could see, Vatican II reversed the negativity contained in the Oath Against Modernism.

My Summers while I was a Seminarian were largely spent on the Doherty Farm, as I mentioned before, and I loved it. Dominic and his wife, Mary, and their four children made me feel I was part of the family. Their son, Dominic Junior, was ordained in 1956, and I was at his ordination and his first Mass along with Edmund Dorrington and Des McMahon.

I would spend a few weeks with my Aunt Nellie, who was married to Bernie Mulvey. Priests were a rarity in County Leitrim because they had no high school for boys. There was a girl’s high school in Carrick on Shannon run by the Marist Sisters. I was kind of a prize exhibit leading up to and past my Ordination. I got to know and enjoy a lot of characters around Drumaweel.

## An Eccentric Priest

My greatest joy became the Curate, Father Joe Scally. I went everywhere with him in his Volkswagen - on sick calls, visiting friends and relations in his native County Longford. He was a great horseman, and had a horse called RE-actor, that he presented at the Dublin Horse Show. He was a friend of other horsemen (mostly Protestant) around Drumahaire. He put on a gymkhana show to raise money for the parish, and one of them brought in 150 pounds for the parish (a considerable amount of money in those days).

He was a rebel in every direction. He didn't get along with any of the P.P.s (Pastors) until Father Conroy came along. He wisely divided the Parish in two. He left the mountain section (called Rantogue) to Father Scally. It was a very happy marriage. The mountain folk loved him, and you could not say a word against the mountain people as long as Father Scally was around. And, of course, he did not get along with the Bishop. I don't know what caused the enmity, but I was totally aware of it. I remember helping him to get his stuff ready for the annual diocesan retreat of the priests in Longford town. I was watching the clock and I said, "Shouldn't you be on your way. You're going to be late." He said, "I want to be late. The Bishop gives the Opening Talk in the high school chapel, and I judge he will be halfway through his talk when I walk up the middle aisle."

But strangely enough for a rebel, the people had great belief in his prayers. Kathleen Curran from Drumshanbo told me that people would come to him for prayers when a relative was seriously ill and ask him to say the Breviary for the sick person. Kathleen maintained, he would either agree to say the prayers and they would get well or he wouldn't accept the stipend and let them "Welcome the Will of God" and they would not recover.

Father Barney O'Reilly told me years later that he became a popular P.P., so much so that the people persuaded the Bishop to keep him on as a Retired Priest. until his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. So you never know with the "rebels."

## Two Pilgrimages

During my six years at the Seminary I was lucky to be sponsored (paid for) for two great pilgrimages. One was the climbing of Croagh Patrick (the Irish for Croagh Patrick, CRUACH PHADRAIG meaning "Saint Patrick's Mountain," nicknamed "The Reek." It is a mountain 2,507 feet, some 5 miles from the beautiful town of Westport and just above the villages of Murrisk and Lecanvey. It is the third highest mountain in County Mayo after MWEELREA and NEPHIN. What makes it stand apart is that it is cone-shaped and easily distinguishable from the others, even when miles away.

Croagh Patrick has repeatedly been the site of pagan pilgrimages, especially the Summer Solstice since 3,000 B.C. It is now the site of Christian pilgrimages associated with Saint Patrick who fasted on the summit for forty days in the fifth Century A.D. Thousands of people climb the mountain every "Reek Sunday" which is the last Sunday of July.

From Saint Patrick's own time there has been some sort of little chapel on the summit called "TEAMPALL PHADRAIG," an archaeological excavation in 1994 that found the remains of a foundation at the summit. In reading the history what amused me was that 824 A.D. the Archbishops of Armagh and Tuam disagreed as to who had jurisdiction. Mass is celebrated in the Church on Reek Sunday and on August 15th.

I was lucky to be brought there by two great friends, Paddy Sharkey, a brother of my neighbor, John Sharkey, and his great friend Pat Crowley from Loughlynn. We climbed the mountain all night in the dark and arrived at the summit in time for the 5:30 Mass. What a joy to be part of that very special reverent group of congregants (mostly natives).

After Mass we were able to get mugs of hot tea and sandwiches before we started the descent. We hadn't gone too far in the descent when suddenly the morning mist started to evaporate, and we got a magnificent view of Clew Bay way down below where we started the descent. It was a magnificent panoramic view of the Bay. Clew Bay has 365 islands- one for every day of the year, and all were visible when we began our descent.

We were told to be careful initially because the higher parts of the mountain are composed of small, round stones, and you had to take small steps as you could easily be propelled and lose control. As a matter of fact, the very time we started the descent, one man lost control and somersaulted, cracked his head, and was pronounced dead by the paramedics. It was the only fatal accident in the history of Reek!

## **St. Patrick's Purgatory**

St. Patrick's Purgatory is an ancient pilgrimage site on Station Island in Lough Derg County Donegal. According to legend the site dates from the fifth century when Christ showed St. Patrick a cave, sometimes referred to as a Pit or well that was an entrance to the Purgatory. Its importance in Medieval Times is clear from the fact that it is mentioned clearly in texts from as early as 1188 A.D. and shown on maps from all over Europe as early as the 15th Century. It is the only Irish rite designated on Martin Brhaim's world map of 1497 A.D. I was lucky that Mrs. Annie Brennan funded the trip for me and her son, Dominic.

Every year the main pilgrimage began in late May/early June and ends in mid-August on the 15th - the Feast of the Assumption. It is a three day pilgrimage open to pilgrims of all religions or none, who must be at least fifteen years of age, in good health and able to walk and kneel unaided. Pilgrims should begin fasting at the previous Midnight and assemble at the Visitor's Center on the shore of Lough Derg, early in the day (between 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.). From there a boat will ferry them on a brief trip

out to Station Island. Once on the island they are assigned a dormitory room and bare footed they begin a specified and almost continuous cycle of prayers and liturgies.

Pilgrims spend the first night in the Island's Basilica in prayer, and only on the second night can they finally sleep in the dormitory. Each day on the island, the pilgrims have one simple meal of dry toast, oat cakes, and black tea or coffee. On the third morning they are ferried back to the mainland where they will continue the fast until midnight. Tough as it was by the third day I felt I could jump over the moon. Dominic and I stopped in Slego to pick up a few items for our first real breakfast - thick bacon, black pudding, Donnelly's sausage, homemade brown bread and tomatoes. I didn't eat at midnight, slept through the night, attended a Mass at the Cathedral, and drooled all the way through Mass thinking of the feast I was going to have when I got home. To this day I have never enjoyed a meal like that one. The three days Dominic and I had together bonded us. He was a shy, introverted young fellow and had difficulties relating to others, but I knew always I had his undying friendship.

To back-track somewhat to my last year in high school, we were fortunate enough to be 20 miles from the National Shrine of Knock. Knock is a strange name for people from abroad. It is common to folks from Ireland; it means "hill." Many towns, villages, historic sites would have the name "Knock" instilled in it. But when used as a name for the shrine, it was singular actually the official name for the Shrine in *Sadio Cnock* meaning Hill of Mary or Mary's Hill.

Our Leitrim cousins would make a pilgrimage, maybe once a year, and they would stop in to see us on the way to Knock. Mother always rose to the occasion, and would quickly put a meal together for the guests. Actually we had a routine where Dad would take us to the garden and get fresh vegetables like lettuce and onions (scallions). Vincent would go down to the Towey's and get sliced ham, and I would go to Noone's and get beet root

and sliced soda cake. We got quite skillful at it, and it was done so discreetly that no one was hardly aware of the operation. But one of the results of these visits was that our Leitrim cousins got to love Winnie and she them! And to be fair to our Leitrim cousins, they always treated us royally when we descended on them, and they did not have the advantage of being surrounded by little shops.

Before I depart from high school days, there was one more adventure that four of us who had done Leaving Certificate together- and that was a 20 mile walk to Knock, and a 20 mile walk back to Ballagh. The idea was to pray for good results in one “Leaving” exam. Four of us started out. One dropped out in Knock itself. Barry Freyne couldn’t bring himself to refuse a ride home from a friend. That left me and Hauli Creation. It was a bear. The mistake we made was to tarry in Knock Village. That zaps your energy, and to cap it off Seamus O’Donnell, John Hickey came out from Ballagh on bikes and made a U- turn the Ballagh side of Kilmovee, giving us some good natured ribbing. All we could do was put one foot in front of another. We couldn’t even talk! The boys didn’t rib for too long, but rather boosted us to make the last five miles home. (Incidentally, Hauli Creaton became Superintendent in the Guards, and the President in St. Kierans praised the results I phoned to him in St. Kierans). But my love for Knock Shrine remained steadfast and even increased over the years.

## **The Story of Knock**

On the evening of Thursday, August 21, 1879 at about 8:00, fifteen people who ranged in age from five to seventy-five, and included men, women, teenagers and children, witnessed what they stated was an apparition of Our Lady, Saint Joseph, and Saint John the Evangelist at the south gable of the local small parish Church, the Church of Saint John the Baptist. Behind them and a little left of Saint John was a plain altar. On the altar was a cross

and a lamb, a traditional image of Jesus, as reflected in the refrain said before Communion time- - “Behold the Lamb of God,” with adoring angels.

Two women passing by the Church first noticed it and summoned what would become a small crowd of fifteen. The Blessed Virgin Mary was described as being “beautiful,” standing a few feet above the ground. She wore a white cloak, hanging in full folds, and fastened at the neck.

Those who witnessed the apparition stood in the pouring rain for up to two hours reciting the Rosary. When the apparition began there was good light, but although it became very dark, witnesses could still see the figures very clearly. Witnesses reported that the ground around the figures remained completely dry during the apparition.

A Commission of Inquiry was established by the Archbishop of Tuam on October 8, 1897, and depositions from the witnesses continued for several months. The Commission’s final verdict was that the testimony of all the witnesses was base worthy and satisfactory. At a second Commission of Inquiry in 1936, the surviving witnesses confirmed the evidence they gave in the first Commission.

A number of cures and favors are associated with the visitors to Knock’s Shrine, and those who claim to have been cured there, still leave crutches and sticks at the spot where the apparitions are believed to have occurred. While the original church still stands, a new apparition chapel with statues of Our Lady, St. Joseph, the lamb and St. John, the Evangelist, has been built at the gable end of the old church.

A number of Popes have endorsed the apparition. In 1945 Pope Pius blessed the banner of Knock from St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome; on Candle-mus Day 1960 Pope St. John XXIII presented a special candle to Knock. Pope Paul VI in 1974 blessed the foundation stone for a new Basilica. On the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Pope St. John Paul II visited the shrine, established

the shrine church as a basilica, presented a candle and the Golden Rose to the shrine, and knelt in prayer at the apparition wall.

Knock received world- wide attention largely due to the long-time parish priest, Monsignor James Horan. Horan presided over a major rebuilding on the site. But the Monsignor is mostly remembered for the fact that he secured a promise from the then Prime Minister, Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, a pledge to support the building of an airport a few miles from the Shrine. He did in fact secure thousands of pounds in State Aid, so the airport got built.

The project was condemned by critics in the media and dire prophecies about the future of the airport. But with the advent of low-fare and discount airlines, Horan International Airport was a commercial success, and remains so to this day. With the permission of the Monsignor the name was changed to “Ireland’s West Airport, Knock,” and it draws not only pilgrims as passengers, but has become the gateway for the whole province of Connaught.

What was special about Knock was that the apparition occurred as the people were finally coming out of the disaster of the Famine which had decimated the population of Ireland. One of the areas of Ireland that was hit hard by the famine was West Mayo, the county in which Knock is located.

The second thing that struck me about the apparition at Knock was the fact that there were no words uttered during the apparition. I don’t want to take away from places like Lourdes, which I have always loved, or Fatima, but for me what it emphasizes is the need for silence and silent prayer. The words from Scripture that come to me are “do not rattle on like pagans do” (Matt 6:7). I am a very social person and love to be with people who share their experience, strength and hope, but I also like to get away to a place where I can enjoy the quiet. We have God who is willing to share His wisdom, but we have to give Him a chance to get a word in. It seems to be that the present emphasis among spiritual writers is “Listening.”



## Ordinations and the Celebrations

Well, the big day came on May 31, 1959 on the Feast of Our Lady, Queen of Angels and Saints. There were 200 of us, and we were joined by three Mill Hill Fathers, candidates from Freshford town ten miles east of Kilkenny. The Ordinations were usually done by Dr. Collier, Bishop of Ossery, but he was advanced in years and not very well. He just was not able to do it. So this year they brought one of the auxiliaries down from Dublin. Dr. Dunne was a very pleasant man who was introduced to us during the retreat. He ordained us in St. Mary's Cathedral in a lovely two-hour ceremony. I remember the laying on of hands not only by the bishop, but also by all the priests present. There was also the anointing of the palms of our hands, the binding of the hands with linen clothes, and the prostration of us all on the floor of the Sanctuary, and many other things, but that was the most impressive gesture of the whole ceremony. Vincent came to be with me there and told me that Aunt Lizzie cried during the whole ceremony. Then they took pictures on the steps of the Cathedral, and then we went back to the Seminary for breakfast. Next there were blessings by the new priests on the lawn of the Seminary not only for relatives and friends of the newly ordained, but for more of the citizens of the city of Kilkenny, which were all done in glorious sunshine. The day concluded with Benediction on the veranda of the newly constructed wing of the Seminary.

Saint Kieran's had a rule, unique among the six Seminaries, that priests and guests stayed in various hotels around the city on Sunday night. They didn't start for home until Monday after the First Mass and breakfast. My first Mass was out on the road in the Chapel of Auteven Hospital. Father P.S. Spellman (Mother's Cousin) assisted at the Mass, as well as Des McMahon and Dick Cronin served the Mass. The nuns had everything beautiful and immaculate.

Then after long farewells, the big journey home was started stopping at a restaurant in Althone for a light lunch. But for me the most memorable

event took place where our cortege passed through the Village of Longhlynn six miles from Ballagh. Our driver, Dominic O'Donnell who was always called "Rambler", suddenly said, "What is this? What is this?" which roused us from a snooze I was having in the back seat. Dominic said, "It must be a funeral because there are an awful lot of cars coming our way."

As cars passed by on the other side, I recognized some of the faces; they were from Ballagh. Then I looked out the back window, and they were making U-turns and falling behind us. There must have been every car in Ballagh in that fleet of cars. And I choked. A half mile from down Babe Toolen (better known as Baby Coleman) had a bonfire in front of her house. When we reached the circular road the boy's fife-and-drum band in colorful outfits fell in front of us and piped us past the Guards Barracks and down the main street. Every house had a flag flying from the second story window (usually papal flags), and they piped to a stop in front of our house. The parish priest, Father McVann Announced, "Father Flanagan has had a grueling couple of weeks, with exams and preparing for his ordination, so he is very tired. If you all kneel down, he will give us a general blessing, and after his Mass tomorrow morning, he will give individual blessings to you all." At that the huge crowd knelt on the blacktop and sidewalks as I gave a sweeping sign of the cross. I felt like the Pope giving his Urbi et Orbe, blessing in Vatican Square. And that is when I fell in love with the people of Ballagh!

The next morning the Cathedral was crowded, and after the Final Blessing, I started blessing all who knelt at the altar rail - men, women and children. Row after row I imparted a blessing on each and every one. First over the head and then laid hands on the shoulders saying, "May the blessing of God descend upon you, and remain with you forever. Amen."

In all of the dioceses the new priests were allowed to have one Mass in their own home which suited me because it was a lot for my little mother, even though she had the way of good help of her cousin, Frankie Gribbun. And we had an inheritance from my first mother - a pull away table, able to

serve twelve people. We had the Sharkeys from next door (north), the Egans and next door (south) the O'Connors and McDonaghs from across the street, and the shoe maker, Dick Chandler and his wife. It was very meaningful. I said Mass with my back to the window, looking to the garden outside. Then we moved the table to the middle and pulled out all the leaves. It really reminded me that the Mass began at the Last Supper with a meal.

But another meaningful Mass was at Knock the following Thursday. Evening Masses had just started, and the Bishop of Tuam allowed one evening Mass a week. I called the R.F. in Knock and asked if I could say the Mass at the gable end. He was very gracious, and said, "We would be delighted to have a newly ordained priest say the First Evening Mass at Knock." Remember that in Kilkenny that year, we were the first group of priests to be ordained. And out in front of me were about thirty invalids in wheelchairs. At the end of Mass I went out, gave each of them a blessing, and engaged every one of them in personal conversation. I felt very fulfilled by such an interchange, and I do believe that my life long love of the sick and the homebound started there at Knock Shrine.

There were still six weeks left before I departed for America. The following Sunday, I said a Mass at my mother's church in Kiltubrid. The thing that amused me was that there was a man called Tim Noone present at my Mass who was quite deaf. On the way home he asked, "Who was that young priest who said the Mass?" They told him he was the son of Mary Kate Gallagher from Coma Leck. He said, "Why didn't someone tell me?" The Noone family owned the farm next to the Gallagher family.

I was invited to a whirlwind of parties. My Aunt Nellie would say, "Now we have accepted an invitation from these people. They were great favorites of your mother." And I enjoyed them all. One family that I got to know was the Nugents. They have relatives of Nellie Nugent who was married to my uncle Frank who was dad's older brother. He and Nellie Nugent owned a

restaurant and bar in Leiti. That is what was then a suburb of Edinburg in Scotland. Sadly he was called up to serve in the British Army during the closing months of WWI and was killed during the last German offensive of the Great War. Vincent and I visited his grave in Bienville on the Western Front.

I was having so much fun that I didn't notice the time was going by. Finally Dad persuaded our neighbor, John Sharkey, to drive him down to Kiltubrid and yank me back to Ballagh. It was only ten days before I was to leave for America.

I felt awfully guilty about that, and it was very unfair to the people of Ballagh who had treated me so well over the years. In a way though, it worked out for my parents. When the cheap flights (Charter flights by Capitol Airlines) became available in the early 60s (Just \$300 round trip), I was able to come every year and spend most of the four weeks with my parents. Monsignor Vadakin was astounded that I spent most of my vacation with my parents, but his parents were always less than an hour away all year. And he didn't know how much fun I had bringing my parents to a different county each year. Eventually, in the middle of July, Dominic O'Donnell drove us to Shannon, and I was on a new phase of my life's journey.

## **Meeting My Relatives in New York**

The airlines were still using propellers, and it took thirteen hours to reach Gander in Newfoundland with three hours more to fly to La Guardia. My Aunt Rose and her husband, Hughie Tims, picked me up at the airport, and I insisted I had to say Mass, as it was still early morning. They took me to an enclosed convent in the Bronx, and the nuns seemed delighted to have a newly ordained priest from Ireland to say Mass in their convent. Rose felt that it would be better that those nuns would be teaching children and working for people in the world. I strongly defended the importance of

prayer and penance that moved the hand of God, who moved the world. We may have disagreed without being disagreeable.

The two weeks in New York was probably the most exciting of my life while meeting relatives that I had never met. It was like getting to know part of oneself that you had never known. When I met my Uncle Mike, the first thing I noticed was the bushy eyebrows. We also had an instant liking for each other. Another person I got bonded with was my uncle-in-law, Tommy Walsh. He was married to my Aunt Bessie and had a son, Johnny, who was preparing to become a Maryknoll priest. Tom Walsh had his sound bone or voice box removed just before I got there and had to speak from a box mechanism in his stomach. I was able to understand every word he said which was a great joy for him. He and my first cousin, Ann Marie, brought me to all the races at Jones Beach. I insisted that we would check first with the parish priest, Monsignor Halpin from Tipperary as to whether I could go to the races at all! The Monsignor took the cigar out of his mouth long enough to tell me, "As long as you bring half your winnings back to me." I did well at the races until the last race when I spent most of my winnings on the horse called "Irish Eyes." He came in second to last. Oddly enough later that year, when I came to California, he won nearly every race he was in!

## **Total Trust or Total Foolishness**

Aunt Rose and her husband, Hughie, could not have been kinder during my two week's stay with them and the time flew. About two days before I left Aunt Rose and I were having a cup of tea and cake in the sitting room. Hughie was in the kitchenette reading all of the New York Times. Rose started to ask me questions about my flight to Los Angeles. "Father Sean, who is going to meet you at the airport?"

“I don’t know. I imagine the bishop will meet me.” “And,” Rose said, “Does he know what plane your are coming on?” “No,” I said, “but I am sure the bishop will check on those planes.”

Rose was now getting alarmed and shouts to Hughie in the den, “Hughie, Father Sean doesn’t know who is going to meet him. He thinks the Bishop will, but the Bishop doesn’t know what plane he is coming in on, or what time he is to arrive.” I told her, “Aunt Rose, these things always work themselves out.” Just then the phone rang and I heard Rose say, “Oh, thanks Father for calling. I am very concerned because Father Sean doesn’t know who is going to meet him in Los Angeles. He thinks the Bishop will, but the Bishop doesn’t know what airlines he is coming or what time he is due to arrive.” It was Father James Gallagher who came from Brosna, outside of Ballaghaderreen who met a few days before I left for the U.S. He was an Associate Pastor of American Martyrs Church in Manhattan Bach, just twenty minutes from LAX (Los Angeles International Airport). I had forgotten I had given him my aunt’s phone number. Rose says, “He wants to talk to you,” as she handed me the phone.

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He said, “Sean, you’re are a mess. You are a mess. What time do you get into LA and what airlines?”

I said, “Saturday at twelve noon on TWA .”

He said “I will pick you up, if I can. If not I will send the janitor for you. He will be waiting for you when you exit the area where you pick up your luggage with a cardboard saying, “Father Sean Flanagan.” He didn’t say much more than that, but said that everything was going to be ok.

“See,” I told her, “I told you it would all work out alright.” She said to Hughie, “Would you please bring me my Valium from the kitchen table.”

## **The Flight to Los Angeles**

The flight to L A . took 4-1/2 hours. To my surprise the plane was half empty. I had a seat all to myself and never a dull moment as I read the TWA magazines and watched as the stewardesses dispensed the meal halfway on our journey to L A. I sat there in my black suit, Roman collar and black shirt. Despite all the eating I had done at home in Leitrim and in New York, I still looked thin. I had lost a stone of weight (14 pounds) in my final year.

After she had put away all the leftovers, the head stewardess came and sat beside me. She was Jan Bronson who told me she came from the Jersey Islands between England and France. She told me she was married to a nice Jewish boy, hence the name Bronson. Coincidentally she lived on a street called Bronson in Hollywood not far from Hollywood and Vine.

I was to have a long association with TWA. Father John Sheahan's sister, Helen Sheahan, came west in the early 1960s, and for a time lived with Joe and Margaret Conlon in Van Nuys. She applied for a job with TWA and was accepted as a stewardess. She did six months training in Kansas City. Then she took flights out of Washington, DC, to various parts of Europe and then to the Orient. She said the Koreans were most like the Irish - quick tempered and quick to come back down and they laughed a lot. She also became a member of their Union. So John and I were aware of the ups and downs of TWA.

Darned if it didn't happen as I wrote these words, an article appeared in the LA Times about precisely that, "Highs and Lows of TWA." (March 27, 2017). The company started in 1930 in South Kansas City (which became the headquarters of the company) and where the girls were trained. Early in their history they were joined by a Dutch airlines who supplied them with planes called the Foukers. Hardly a year into their foundation (1931) one of the Fouker planes crashed carrying the famed Notre Dame coach, Knute Rockne, and others into a Kansas field. Rockne's funeral drew tens of thousands of mourners and calls for improvements to airline safety. But the air-

line survived in part because of its “fair weather service” that could take passengers from coast to coast.

In 1946 the airline was making its first international flights, first to Europe and then to Cairo, Bombay and Manilla. In 1969 it completed its trans-Pacific route which made it possible to take TWA around the world. At its height, under the stewardship of Howard Hughes, TWA was the gentlemen’s airline. The airline brought in fashion houses to design uniforms for female flight attendants. (Helen Sheahan left Van Nuys looking like a lovely country girl which she was, but returned six months later looking like a fashion model.)

But all was not well under Hughes. He had a propensity for secrecy and covered up his mismanagement. By the end of the 1980, TWA was losing money. It was at this time there was a component of a much larger portfolio which included Hilton Hotels and Century 21. By 1984, the conglomerate cut TWA loose. In 1992 it declared bankruptcy. Another bankruptcy occurred in ’95 and it limped along for five more years. Onerous union contracts and lack of cash flow proved too much. They merged with American Airlines, but by 2001, the world’s first airline came to an end, and its name was retired after 71 years of life. In south Kansas City there is a five room TWA Museum that is a living monument to an airline that ferried kings, Presidents, and even a Pope or two, now hemmed into a small space of what was Kansas City’s first airport.

Jan Bronson hit me with lots of questions. She wanted to ask me if my family lives in LA. I say, “No, but I have a lot of priest friends there.” She wanted to know how soon I would be able to return to Ireland to see my parents again? I sighed and told her that the soonest possible would be three years. (The priests of L A . at that time were given two or three weeks vacation.) But I did tell that if I waited five years (arranged between new assignments), I could have three months. The stewardess had a motherly concern for all I had told her.



Two years later I was flying back by TWA to New York on the way to Ireland. The same stewardess stopped dead on the aisle and stared at me in disbelief. "You told me you would not be able to go back to see your parents for at least three years! I said, "Things change," and I added, "You're the one from the islands where thy pick potatoes." Then I remembered her name. Well we were to see each other on quite a few flights.

## **How I Adapted to Los Angeles**

I was picked up at the airport by the janitor from American Martyrs. I spent Saturday afternoon swimming in the pool owned by the McCormicks who owned a number of mortuaries. I had dinner that night at the rectory with the pastor, Monsignor Ned O'Donnell, Father Jim and the first American priest I met, Father Joe Cokus who had just completed his first year as a priest in American Martyrs.

They had me do two Masses. (Then God I didn't have to preach- Father Cokus did!) The rectory was brand new. You would sink up to your ankles in the beautiful carpets. I said to myself, "I am never going to save my soul in luxury like this." Six months later in my first assignment in La Habra I couldn't wait to get into the new rectory on Central Avenue. Corruption set in very quickly!

Father Cokus was very kind to me, and we remained life long friends.

## **A Sunday of Excitement and Drama**

Michael Nathy Gallagher (better know as "Moppy") was subject to chest problems, and he chose to work picking potatoes in Jersey Island. Apparently it did him a lot of good because his health improved significantly. Father Gallagher had me say two Masses, and I was given a stipend that would be given to a visiting priest. And after the last Mass about 1:30 p m . Father Gallagher and I took off in his car to visit four houses of his friends. I admired how cousin Jim could sweep in the out of the first three houses. He

would tell the same story at each house about visiting the sergeant in Loughlyin, and telling him that he was made aware of them selling illegal whiskey (poteen). The sergeant would say, "This is very serious; let me write down all the details." Fr. Jim would not let it go too far before telling him he was a relative of the people he was accusing; and then the sergeant was aware that Fr. Jim was part of the family. And they laughed about it. As I said he did this at three different houses in rapid time. And then we set off for the fourth and final house. It was the home of two great nurses, Irene Carney from Ballaghaderreen and Kathleen Kelly from Galway. They were life long friends and both were nurses at St. Vincent's Hospital at Third and Alvarado.

Also present was a John Hickey and his wife. John was a Sargent with the L.A.P.D.. They arrived with a seventeen-year-old girl from County Cavan College called Georgina O'Reilly. John said "Father Jim, have we got a story to tell you. This morning we were driving home from American Martyrs after the 10:00 o'clock Mass when we spotted Georgina walking by herself. She was carrying her Missal in her hand, and we guessed she was at the 10:00 Mass and Catholic. We offered her a ride, and she gladly accepted. On the way she told us her story. In Cavan she saw an ad in one of the National papers offering a free flight to anywhere in the US if they would accept a position as a live-in babysitter for young children - for just one year. She told us she was there for nine months and never had a day off. She had three children with her in her bedroom, and the father would check at any time to see if the kids were okay.

Well Fr. Jim hit the ceiling; "Why this is white slavery. I know the Irish Consul, and I will go down tomorrow morning and tell him about your plight." I found out that Fr. Jim did consult with the Irish Consul. They did investigate, found it to be true, and demanded a cessation of such flights. It did bring about the end of such "deals."

John Hickey's wife said, "Oh, what must the young priest think of America after hearing this horror story?" Frankly I didn't know what to say.

We were later joined by Father Colm O'Ryan. He was the Associate Pastor and running the parish, Holy Trinity, while the Pastor, Father Dan Gallagher, was away at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Father Dan was Father Jim's older brother and his mentor. Later I found out that Georgina trained as a nurse and joined Irene Carney and Kathleen Kelly at St. Vincent's Hospital. She later married one of the McCaffrey boys from Donegal. There's more, but that's another story.

## The First Week

Somehow on Monday of that first week, John Sheahan managed to borrow a car. (He was a Seminarian and couldn't have a car.) He came down, picked me up, and brought me to the rectory of St. Mary Magdalene Church on Coming and Olympic, two blocks west of the famous La Cienega Boulevard. It is famous because it had a slew of famous restaurants like Lowry's, The Captain's Table, The Mediterranean, and more. (It amuses me that the Church's location made it more than fifteen minutes from where I live now.)

The Administrator of the parish was Father Tony McGowan from Killasnoe in County Mayo. The retired pastor was Monsignor Tom Morris who was an icon in the diocese, from Moyne, Co. Longford. Monsignor had just lost his brother, Monsignor Jim. The housekeeper, Ellen McGuinness, was also from Moyne, Co. Longford. I got along great with the old Monsignor. (I always like old people.) Monsignor McGuinness pointed to a bird looking perkily at us, two ejits at the breakfast table. The bird appeared at the window the first day that Monsignor Jim died, and Monsignor Tom gave orders that the bird be taken care of in every way.

I was there for the best part of the week, and Ellen looked after me like a mother hen. (I was still very thin and a bit awestruck by the fast moving

events surrounding me.) John Anthony said, “Why do you have to go to a new parish so soon? Call the pastor and see if you can stay until Saturday.”

I called Father Coleman. He was very kind, but said, “Where does your certificate of appointment say?”

I said, “It said to report early on Thursday.”

“Well,” he said, “Maybe you should follow what they asked you to do. Besides you have Confessions for the First Fridays from 3:30 and 7 to 8.”

John was disappointed, but he drove me to La Habra in Orange County in time for Confessions. We had been well prepared for confessions in the Seminary, but it was so different when you actually did it. And something happened that the Seminary did not prepare us for. My first penitent was a boy of about eight or nine. (We couldn’t see the penitent because of the gauze cloth that prevented the priest from seeing the penitent, and it prevented the penitent from seeing the priest.) The little boy started off fine with “Bless me Father for I have sinned.” And then he stopped. I said, “Go on.”

He said, “Father I think I am going to get sick. What should I do? What should I do?”

I said to myself, “What should he do? What should he do?” I couldn’t remember them telling us what to do in such a situation.

But then the little boy said, “Father it’s too late, but I caught most of it in my hands. What should I do now?”

I said, “It’s ok, son. Just say one Our Father when you get out.” He left and I heard an adult on the other side and dismissed him.

Another little boy got in the first confessional and started out with, “Bless me Father for I have sinned. Then he stopped dead and said, “It’s all gooey in here.” I told him how a little boy got sick in there. I told him, “Say just one Our Father and leave the door open after you.”

That was my first experience, and I must say I got to like hearing confessions. One lady I got to know well a few years later, Kay Pohl, said, "You know you really are like one of my teenagers, but when you hear confession, you are very mature." It was a left handed compliment, but I liked it. I just concluded that the Spirit guided us.

We had confessions again on Saturday, home for dinner and then back again for confessions from 7 to 8. Father Coleman seemed in a hurry to drive us home. I found out why - to catch as much as we could of the Lawrence Welk Show. He told me, "It's such a wholesome show." He told me that Lawrence Welk wouldn't tolerate anything bawdy on his show. He even let two of his "Champagne Ladies" go because they made off-colored remarks on the show. The stars of the show were the Lennon Sisters, and the young one was Father Coleman's favorite.

I had two Masses on Sunday. On my first Sunday I preached on the Dangers of Materialism, how money and possessions could come between a person and God. The money counters jokingly said, "Oh is this what he thinks of us American?" But Father Coleman was delighted and said, "The Spirit just didn't blow a wind. He blew a gale."

Father Coleman who came from Buttevant Co. Cork proved to be a kindly man, but at first he was kind of distant. He had a bad experience with a previous associate and was chastened by it. A marvelous coincidence occurred that changed the whole atmosphere. It had to be an intervention of the Holy Spirit.

One day when I thought Fr. Coleman was out, I was leaning against the kitchen door while talking to the old German housekeeper. (She was flat footed and old, about eighty I believe at this time.) I said to her, "I am often worried that I am not doing the right thing. Father Coleman doesn't tell me what he wants. I wish he would tell me what to do."

Then a sudden thought crossed my mind. Maybe he is in his office. I took a few steps back, and sure enough he was at his desk, pouring over some papers, pretending he hadn't heard anything. But that night he told me that the finest thing any priest could do was to visit people in their homes. He said, "The old priests believed in visiting the homes. Now I am not saying they are right, but I do it myself and think it's the greatest work parish priests could do." I got my census cards first thing on Monday and went a-visiting. To this day I think it is the finest thing a priest can do. I would share with Father about who I met and the interesting things they told me about themselves. And I became Father Coleman's fair-haired boy. I could do nothing wrong after that.

## **The First Five Years**

I was to witness a lot of changes in La Habra and Orange County as a whole. When Father Coleman was appointed Pastor, the parish was mostly Mexican. The church was a small chapel on Hillcrest St., and this Mexican population lived in a barrio across the other side of the railway tracks. Previously Our Lady of Guadalupe was a subsidiary of St. Mary's Church in Fullerton. Father Coleman came to love his little Mexican parishioners. He said, "The ladies were not afraid to wash the pews and get down on their knees to wash the floor. They helped priests collect money to build a new church. I joined Father Coleman in his little house on Hillcrest, but I looked forward to moving into the new rectory on Central Avenue (later on La Habra Boulevard).

The area was changing rapidly. The G.I.s who were stationed in Southern California during WWII remembered the gorgeous climate and now they applied to move away from the Mid- West and cities like Chicago to bring or start families in Orange County. So the parish which had been Mexican, now became 90% Anglo. What I greatly admired about Father Coleman was the fact that he resisted all attempts to have the name changed from Our

Lady of Guadalupe to numerous other titles. He never forgot his little Mexican ladies who washed the floors and cleaned the pews.

With the whole population booming, we were kept busy. Confession lines were long even on an ordinary week. Masses were crowded, and we were lucky to have a priest from Servite High School who help with the Sunday Masses. I had a lot of marriages and also a lot of babies for Baptism. (I remember one Sunday I had thirteen babies to baptize.) My one great joy was the Youth Group, and I would go with them to Pacific Ocean Parks near Santa Monica. I even raised my hands up high as we looped the loop on that ride.

My favorite group was the Christian Family Movement. It had been started by the previous Associate and had three great groups composed of eight couples who would study and discuss a passage of Scripture and conclude with some action based on what they had read and discussed. "See, judge, act" were the watchwords. One particular group had a political savvy, and I learned a lot about American politics, especially in the first year when a Catholic was running for President. I could not resist that Catholic and Irish connection, but despite that Orange County was rife with political conservatism. The Anti-Communist crusades were in full blast and lots of parishioners were attracted to the John Birch Society. The politically savvy group were divided, two-thirds Republican and one-third Democrat. But the Democrats held their own, and the good part was they all remained friends.

I would join the ladies for coffee and cake at the end of the meeting and learned a lot about family life in America. The discussions had a practical side to it also. For instance the mothers would get a balance on such things as to how soon their teenagers should come home at night, etc., etc., etc.. Outside the parish my great joy was my day off first with my buddies from Roscommon: Tom Glynn, John Fallon and Pat Gannon. We played golf,

went to dinner and played cards, a famous Irish game called “One-Hundred and Ten.”

When John Sheahan was ordained in 1960 and appointed to St. Brigid of Sweden parish in Van Nuys, I wasn’t able to be at his ordination, but could do sub-deacon at his first Mass. I hadn’t a clue as to what I should do as a sub-deacon. I had very little experience in the seminary. Mostly you stood at the bottom step with a veil around your shoulders and holding a paten in both hands in front of your face. I got bored and wandered around the altar quite a bit. The only trouble was that it was all captured on tape and showed to friends in the Southland and even in Ireland!

I had great fun days with John Sheahan. On those days he was very handsome, liked to dress well, and could entertain a room full of people almost single-handedly. I was often the fall guy. He gave a lot of attention to preparing sermons, and they were good. Teaching was in the family. His father was a teacher before joining the police department. His sister, Gertie, was also a teacher. A mortician told me that at the end of one of his sermons (now called Homilies) the congregation rose to their feet with a spontaneous applause that lasted several minutes. (I never had that happen to me!) I used to call him on Saturday night to get pointers for a homily on Sunday morning. I’d say, as I jotted down notes, “That’s great stuff, John!” He got along with everyone except the pastor. The pastor gave him a guest calendar for Christmas wrapped in holiday paper. He also provided John with a clunker of a car, and John let it be known that he had need of a good car for his day off. And the ladies made sure we had the best. I remember Rosemary from the Dick Van Dyke Show gave him the loan of her four door coupe. We went down the 405 Freeway with John pressing all the buttons and suddenly the top started rolling back. He had me trying to hold it down as we sped south on the freeway. John had the world by the tail in those days.



There were a lot of celebrities around Van Nuys in those days, and John was given season tickets to use at various places. We saw live shows at the Biltmore Hotel downtown at Fifth and Los Angeles St.. We saw Harry Belafonte perform with his entourage at the Hollywood Bowl and also Peter, Paul, and Mary. We traveled to Orange County to see Don Ho sing at Melodyland across from Disneyland. I never met a man who could think of more things to do on a day off than John Anthony Sheahan.

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We never lost contact with the housekeeper at St. Mary Magdalene's. She left her three bachelor brothers in Moyne, County Longford and came to live with her married sister in Thousand Oaks. Never one to wait around, she kept checking the papers for a job and lo-and-behold she saw an ad that a parish priest was looking for a housekeeper. She checked and marvelous to relate, the pastor was not only Irish, but from the same village in Ireland. It seemed like a match made in heaven. But all was not well.

The old pastor was very much tied to the past, especially where women were concerned. They were expected to milk the cows, wash the potatoes, feed the chickens and go to the well as needed. Now the Monsignor didn't specifically ask for those things, but he was particularly demanding.

We heard that Ellen fell off the ladder while putting up Christmas lights. She had to return to her sister in Thousand Oaks and convalesced there for several months. About a year to the date Father Coleman took his first trip to Ireland in two years. The trouble he had was related to a housekeeper he had called Agatha who told him from the beginning that when Father Greeley got his first parish, she would promptly join him as his housekeeper. The word came that Father Greeley was promoted to pastor and would take his own parish on August 13<sup>th</sup>. Agatha told Father Coleman, and he simply ignored it and took off for Ireland on August 1st. I believed her and started to panic. I called John Sheahan in Van Nuys and said, "What am I going to

do?” He said with his usual astuteness, “You know Ellen McGuinness’s leg should be better about this time, so when you come up on Thursday, we will take a trip out to see her in Thousand Oaks.”

After lunch we told Ellen the real reason we were there. And she said, “No, No, No. I have had such a bad experience at Mary Magdalene’s, I never want to work in a rectory again! You know, I was even happy that I broke my leg because it gave me a good excuse to give up working in a rectory ever again!”

But John Sheahan with his usual charm, kept working on her, and finally broke her down. She said, “OK. I’ll take pity on Father Sean., and I’ll come down for a full month ‘til Father Coleman gets back, but no more than that.” Well to make along story short, when Ellen and Father Coleman met, they hit it off. And she was his housekeeper for twenty-three years until she retired. Father Coleman visited her in her apartment in Fullerton and took her to lunch every week. I would remind him when he praised Ellen, “I got her for you.”

But he’d say “Yes, but she stayed because of me.”

We took a few vacations together. I got to know his family very well, and John visited my parents and relatives in Leitrim. The most memorable trip that we took, joined by Fr. Pat Gannon, was a trip that was billed as “Eleven Countries in 22 days.” It started from London; we then flew to Amsterdam and from there to Belgium and Luxembourg and Cologne. We checked into a hotel there, and the receptionist was rather Teutonic. The war films were very much on our minds.

“You vill hav room 22 on the second floor.”

Breakfast will be promptly at 7:00 and will conclude promptly at 9:30 sharp,” she stated. As we mounted the stairs, I said to the boys, “I feel I am going to be machine gunned before I reach the second floor.” That night we attended a beer hall and joined the crowd as they swayed and sang joyful

beer songs with their backs to the wall. It was obvious that the young crowd wanted to forget what happened in their country and move on with their lives.

Next we took a lovely boat trip up the Rhine where 1500 people disembarked in perfect order. We were in Herzberg the night the U.S. astronauts landed on the moon. The excitement in town and in the tavern was palpable. After all the chief architect of the moon landing was the German, Werner Van Braun. Following that we went to Switzerland, saw the statues of the Reformers in Berne (I wanted to throw a stone at Cromwell), and on to Lake Lucerne. Across the Alps we were heading for Venice when the bus broke down, and we were fed in Innsbruck. In Venice Father Gannon and I shared a garret overlooking St. Mark's, and we discovered that a bidet was useful to cool a bottle of wine! On to Italy we almost missed the magnificent statue of David in Florence. Then we went to Rome and Bergamo (the home of Pope John XXIII") and onward to the French Alps of the Riviera. Finally we reached Paris where we caught a show at the Moulin Rouge.

During our trip I was conscious that John was not well. He was taking pills for headaches, and he had to move rooms because it was too noisy. When we got back to the U S . he went immediately to the doctor who immediately sent him to St. Vincent's where they detected he had scar tissue on the left side of the brain due to undetected meningitis from his childhood. Dr. Hitzberger performed surgery and cut away as much tissue as he could. But he was left with aphasia by which he lost 50% of his speech and made it impossible for him to perform as a priest again. He was only eleven years an ordained priest and merely thirty-six years of age.

## **Three Parishes Had the Boys from Roscommon**

My days, months, and years at La Habra were happy ones. I was looking forward to the full five years there. I had some close relationships with two families. One was the Galaners from Troy, Ohio. On Friday nights I would

join Dick and Betty Ann and their five children for popcorn and to watch the Flintstones. When football season began, Dick would pick me up on Friday night and bring me to the high school football games. Mater Dei ruled over all. Dick would tell me about the finer points of the game. I came to love American football and followed Mater Dei High School in all their victories, and of course we also followed Notre Dame University, with Father Coleman took me to my first professional football game with the Rams and Forty- niners. I kept asking questions and some really ridiculous ones like, "How many quarters are there." Of course the answer is four quarters. "How very logical," I said as Father laughed.

The other family was the O'Sullivan's in La Mirada. Bill O'Sullivan came from Castlebournbeare, County Cork, and Eileen came from Taghmaconnell, County Roscommon. Bill worked for the railroads. Eileen was not just a housewife, but was deeply involved with Church and School. They came to see me the very first week I was in La Habra. On a Saturday when I had finished a marriage or two, I would head over to Jacana Drive to have tea and scones before going back for Confessions. And on Sunday evening, when I was finished with the Public High School CCD, Religious Education I'd head back for tea and scones and relax while watching shows like George Goebel and re-runs of the Honeymooners with Jackie Gleason, Art Carney, and Jane Meadows. We became such friends that they named their fourth child, Sean Michael, after me. I was as cozy in La Habra and Guadalupe as a baby in a cocoon. Imagine when I came back from Ireland in September at the end of the fourth year to find I was being transferred to a parish in Los Angeles in an area called Hyde Park.

With just a brief note from the Chancellor, Monsignor Hawkes, saying I was to move to the new parish by October 15th. I was hurt and angry and so was Father Coleman. We tried to figure out why I was being changed after four years. The only thing we could figure was that an anonymous letter had been sent to the Chancery Office bitterly protesting that first the pastor

and then the associate were taking vacations to Ireland back-to-back. Later I considered another possibility. I was being sent to Monsignor Martin McNicholas. He was from Killaser about fifteen miles from Ballagh and was a graduate of St. Nathy's High School and also from Achonry Diocese.

St. John the Evangelist was quite a different second parish from Our Lady of Guadalupe. Guadalupe had almost all young couples with young families. St. John's was an old parish. There were quite a few German- Irish marriages and very good ones, too.

I was put in charge of the Young Adults. They were much easier to deal with than the teenagers. They practically ran the club themselves. I was also in charge of the Men's Club. The President, during my whole time there was a Marin Kristovich. He was a lawyer and a very handsome man with an equally good looking wife, Llorine Brady. Maren's brother, Baldo Kristovich, was a public administrator for the State of California, and he was also president of all the Holy Name Societies of the Archdiocese. He got in trouble over by tipping off friends about special deals where people died along the interstate. I asked the head of the history department at Loyola, "Why would a man with a huge salary and a prestigious office, do things that endangered both his portion of success and income?" He answered simply, "Doing favors for your friends."

Monsignor McNicholas was almost totally blind. He would join me and Fr. Josh Campbell, and Fr. Peter O'Reilly for dinner. He had a great sense of humor, and I always had stories to share that made him laugh. I would overhear him telling his brother, Fr. Tom, one or all of the stories. He complained one time that so few people showed up for the Forty Hours anymore. I suggested that we put a calendar in the Vestibule where one or two might attend for a half-hour of Adoration. He told me, "Go ahead," but no one signed up. Then I realized that no one wanted to be the first to sign, so I added the names of Irish heroes like Daniel O'Connell, Patrick Sarsfield and

Brian Boras, and the whole chart/calendar filled up in record time. The Monsignor laughed heartily about the inclusion of the Irish heroes.

My special friends were the Cavanaughs on Brynhurt. Through them I got to know the Claretian priests, especially Fr. Henry and his brother. The latter became a Claretian and Pastor of the Padua downtown Los Angeles. I was at St. John's for two years and eight months. Somehow I got the favor of the Chancellor, Monsignor Hawkes, and when the A.D.M. of Cathedral was about to be moved, Monsignor Hawkes chose me to take his place. The parish was called "Cathedral Chapel" because it was intended to be the new Cathedral that Archbishop Cantwell planned to build. Property was bought already on Rimpau Blvd. and Wilshire. It was never to be! Cantwell died and was succeeded by Cardinal McIntyre who spent all the money on new schools, both grammar and high schools.

I called Cathedral Chapel "the third parish of the Millionaires" because it had parishioners Von der Ahe (Von's markets), Van de Kamps, Howard Amanson and celebrities like Jackie Gleason, Josephine Wayne (John Wayne's wife), Jimmy Durante (everyone thought he was Jewish!) and people like Lee Murrin, who was Howard Hughes' finance manager for his personal affairs, and lots more.

The pastor, Monsignor James Edward Dolan (nicknamed by the priests as JED) was a colorful character and well-suited to his clientele in the parish. He was brought up with a "silver spoon" in his mouth. His father was the manager of such holds as the Del Coronado on Coronado Island. Also he managed a hotel in Yellowstone National Park and a historic hotel in Pasadena. Jed was an only child and was wealthy on his own right. He was an early member of the Jonathan Club in downtown Los Angeles and the club in Santa Monica. He would bring me and Father Mayer to such nationally famous restaurants as Perinos, the Mediterranean, Chasen's, Robaire's and Lawry's.

We had some words there. Every evening, I and Father Mayer would set out for Park La Brea and do census work and report back to the Monsignor. He ran two churches. One was Cathedral Chapel itself and another was St. John Vianney on Third and Detroit St. We had the help of the Jesuits at Loyola and the Dominicans at St. John Vianney. The Churches were beautifully kept, and the parish was well-run. Monsignor Hawkes told me he modeled his church, St. Basil's, on the way that Jed managed his. He loved to party, and one young teacher told me she loved to be at his Masses or any time because Monsignor reminded her of what a feudal prince might look like. He would have successful fundraisers for the School at the Beverly Hills Hotel and "his ladies" were notable in the City of LA. But being a country boy at heart, this mingling with the celebrated was a bit awesome. (I tried not to let people be aware of that.)

I tried to have a Youth Club, but you couldn't bring them to any place they hadn't been already. With Monsignor's encouragement I gave lectures on "The Documents of the Second Vatican Council." I did it six times and became passionately fond of all that the documents contained.

A sad episode that occurred at this time was the fight between Cardinal McIntyre and the head of the Immaculate Heart nuns who were deeply involved. The Cardinal lived in the parish at Fremont Place, and the school was run by the Immaculate Heart nuns. Sister Peter Damian, the sister who ran the school, was one of the five governing body of the sisters in the LA Archdiocese. Both the Cardinal and Sister Anita were too strong characters. No one would back down, and the net result was that 450 sisters were laicized, and fifty remained who were dubbed "the old Immaculate Hearts." The latter were lucky because they had the support of Sir Daniel Donohue. He was quite wealthy, as he had inherited the wealth and property of the Cement King, Daniel Murphy. (He supplied the cement for Union Station and Hoover Dam.) Sir Daniel bought the mansion of Earl C. Anthony and gave it to "the old Immaculate Hearts" for as long as they lived. When the

last one would expire, the mansion grounds would have become the property of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. The 450 nuns who opted for the changes were left to fend for themselves!

I foolishly did not stay out of the fray. While Monsignor was in the hospital, I had to attend a meeting of the officers of the Women's Council. At the end of that meeting, I fell in all honesty that I should let them know that I favored the change that Sister Anita Caspari, and the 450 wanted for the Order. Peggy Auth (formerly Peggy Kaiser) reacted with pain and passion. "The boss is the boss. You can make suggestions, have impact on any given question, but in the end the boss has to make the decision." It was only then that I could see how painful the situation was. (Strangely enough Paggy Auth remained a good friend.)

### Third Parish

Shortly after that I transferred to Visitation parish in Westchester, was beside the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), a new chapter was about to begin. Far more dramatic than any previous era in my life, the one who helped me make the transition was surprisingly the housekeep Maritza Gasner. She was a flamboyant Hungarian, a carbon copy of Zsa Zsa Gabor. Before I left Cathedral Chapel she sat me down in the kitchen and shared her wisdom based on her experiences. She said, "Father Sean, I believe there is a university in the parish you are going to. I urge you to go back to school. I have noticed you are awed by the priests who came here and were getting their doctorates at UCLA. Well I want to tell you that you are just as smart as they are. I grew up in a family that had wealth and privilege, but first of all our country was overrun by the Germans under Nazi rule and then by Communists under Stalin. Between both we lost everything. So money, property and prestige can be taken away from you - but not education. I urge you to apply to the university and get your degrees that you're so awed by right now."



I got to Westchester in August and consulted with the Jesuits at Loyola. They checked my records from St. Kieran's in Kilkenny and discovered I had enough credits to by-pass the undergraduate school and be admitted to the Master's program. I had to decide between English and History. I chose History because it was my life long love, starting with old Mrs. Galvin back in Balleghaderrean who regaled me with stories about the famine and the history of the town. I was also lucky to have two great history teachers in high school and the seminary (the Reverend Larry McGelterick in Nathy's and Doctor James Brennan at St. Kieran's). I started classes at the end of September. I was lucky to be on the term system, ten weeks at a time which started that year and ended three years later when I graduated.

I wanted to know more about American history, especially since Mother had a passion and love of America and had filled me with stories about her life in America. I had ten courses in all, and seven were in American history. Two were in European history. I had a ten week Summer course to do with the Catholic Church and labor in the early days.

Before I accepted the assignment I told the Chancellor, Monsignor Rawden, I wanted to attend Loyola. He said, "Check with the pastor, and if its alright with him, and doesn't interfere with your parish duties, its OK with us." I was hardly in the door when I told the Monsignor Tommie Sullivan, I wanted to go to Loyola. I would be out one night a week.

He said, "The way young people are turning away from the Church, you would be wise to prepare for a second job." I think he, and quite a few other people, assumed that when you took both degrees you were preparing to leave the priesthood. I had no such idea, but it seemed to me it was a good idea to keep them on their toes. But going to Loyola gave me a new lease on life. I loved the campus life and became great friends with the Chairman of the History Department, Dr. Tony Turhollow. There were only 1500 students in the graduate program, and we had great access to the professors especially in the Coffee Shop. Dr. Turhollow became a father to me, and I

got good advice during my three years there and long afterwards, as well. I did have to take two undergraduate courses, and they were a pain - second term exams instead of researching and adult discussion groups. I pulled off two marvelous stunts while I did the undergraduate courses.

We were asked to choose a subject out of 200 titles. Back in Ireland, I had always been interested about the conspiracy theory, namely that Franklin Delano Roosevelt knew about the attack on Pearl Harbor and did nothing about it because he wanted to get into the War. So I chose a book called *Warning and Decision* by Roberta Wohlstetter. I read the 600 pages of the book, and to my horror when I re-read the instructions with regard to the book we had chosen, it was not about the book itself at all. It really wanted to know how equipped the author was to write on the particular subject.

I went to the library to see what info. I could get on the author. I found practically nothing, just the name and the title of the book. I came back home and paged through the book; I noticed it was written in Hollywood, California. I said to myself, "Surely she would acknowledge her husband in the Preface." Sure enough she praised the patience of her husband, Arthur. I got Arthur's number from the phone directory and called. Lo and behold, I got Roberta herself. I told her I was doing some research on the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I chided her about having no information about herself on the Who's Who! She apologized and said, "What did you want to know?" I told her I wanted to know what preparation had she made to write on the topic. She had indeed made extensive preparation including having the Japanese accounts translated.

I wrote furiously, gave it to a friend to type it, and handed it to the professor the next day. The professor collared me the next day and said, "Where did you get that information?" I told her that I had learned it from the author, herself. She said, "How enterprising of you!" Next day Dr. Turhallow came to me. "Did you actually talk with Roberta Wohlstetter?"

You know she is very seldom in the Southland. She is usually in Washington, DC, and is one of the twelve that are involved in 'Crisis Diplomacy' like advising the government how to deal with the Suez Canal Crisis. Do you think you could call her back and invite her to speak to our students in the History Department?"

"Sure, but would there be money like a stipend?"

"Yes," Turhollow said. "We have a little money in the department, like \$200.

Well, anyway the upshot was that she came to Loyola and addressed all in the history department. She emphasized that there were something like 2,000 "warnings" (she called signals) and from all over the globe. The last place they expected the Japanese would attack was Pearl Harbor because it was heavily armed and protected by both the Army and Navy. What the top brass forgot was that a heavily armed site could also be a superb target to knock out the enemy in one swoop. Only one second lieutenant got the right information.

Mrs. Wohlstetter turned the question to the students. "How do you make sure that in a big organization everyone gets listened to - even a lowly second lieutenant. She gave me a copy of her book and told me to give the stipend to the history department. It was a "red letter day" in my life!

## The Thesis

I didn't choose a thesis; it was chosen for me! On Sunday evening, March 29, 1970, I got a call from the then Monsignor Roger Mahony telling me that he had five bishops at the International Hotel in Westchester. He said that they wanted to say Mass early the next morning and since we were the nearest parish church to the International Hotel, they had the Monsignor call Visitation Church (of all times the pastor, Monsignor Thomas Sullivan had taken off for a few days and left straight after the last Mass about 1:00

p.m.). Well you don't refuse five bishops, so I made an executive decision and told the Monsignor I would have everything ready for what was an unusual Mass, five-bishops and one-Monsignor, but no Congregation. Monsignor Sullivan was totally against Missalettes, so I had to snitch half a dozen from its nearby St. Jerome Church, also in Westchester. They came. They left and booked themselves in for Mass Tuesday morning, and very likely for Wednesday. They came for Mass on Tuesday morning early, but scheduled Mass at 10:00 on Wednesday.

By this time I was getting very friendly with the bishops. I knew one of them, Bishop Donohue of Stockton, well enough to ask him, "What are you guys doing down at the International Hotel?" He told me that they had been trying to work out an agreement between three grape growers and the United Farm Workers Union. And they had a break-through at 3 a.m. this morning. We are going to have a Press Conference at the Archdiocese Chancery Office. He asked, "Would you like to come?" Although I knew very little about farm labor. I sensed there was something important going on, so I went with Bishop Donohue who had a key role in the Press Conference. It took a lot of time to introduce me to the many participants.

First I was introduced to Cesar Chavez and his brother, Richard, and the union Vice President, Dolores Huerta. Then he introduced me to David Freedman, one of the three growers who were willing to sign a contract with the union (then known as the UFWOC, United Farm Workers Organizing Committee). The ranches in question were interconnected. Our ranch was owned by David Freedman, the others were partially owned by David Freedman.

It was a very friendly settlement although I heard a lady from Cathedral Chapel parish tackle me as to "Why is the Catholic Church interfering in something that was entirely economic?" (I was to write a paper that Summer entitled, "The Right to Interfere") When I next saw Dr. Turhollow, I posed the question, "Can I write about that guy, Cesar Chavez?"

She said, “No, because it is already covered by the Press and the Media, but what you could write on is why the Catholic Church is involved in a labor dispute? People want to know.” My paper that summer introduced me to the early involvement of the Catholic Church into labor disputes.

## **Committee of Peace and Justice**

Well the priests got to hear that I had written my thesis on Cesar Chavez and the Catholic Church, and they wanted me to join a committee that was trying to get information about the United Farmers Organizing Committee (U.F.W.O.C.). and the growers and labor contractors to inform the Priest’s Council. Then they could decide whether to join the grape boycott or not. I became the one who would go to the Priest’s Council with the information the Committee had gathered. I gave a single page report to the priests every month. What was useful to me was the meeting with the Labor Contractors. They were the ones who would hire farm workers for the growers. I didn’t like them and neither did the farm workers.

One of the members of the Committee was Father Frank Colborn. We had actually thought about forming a team ministry, but the Placement Board left us sitting for a year and a half, and we abandoned the idea. Frank and I saw pretty quickly that the cause for right was with the farm workers. I will never forget my first day on the picket line. The four of us, Fr. Tallor, Gannon, and Tom Glynn were off for a week. I remember that we were staying at the Massacre Canyon Inn near Beaumont. The owner Mrs. Gilmore was very fond of priests and allowed us to stay at the Inn for half price. The Inn also had its’ own golf course. I had to leave my buddies in the middle of the week to join the picket line that was protesting the attempts of the Teamsters to take over UFWOC and all other farm workers.

The picket line was outside the Teamster’s headquarters in Los Angeles, near Ninth and Union Avenue. I got there, parked my car at the Chancery Office parking down the street. Immediately someone stuck a placard in my

hands, and I became part of a huge circle. I kept saying to myself, I can't believe I am doing this. In front of me was a Quaker lady called Melissa Keller, and at the back of me was Rabbi Sidney Jacob. The humor started almost immediately. Melissa lived in Pasadena in a house overlooking one of the Arroyos. Rabbi Sidney lived with his wife in a condo near Sunset and Fairfax. Melissa loved the Irish and knew quite a lot about them; Rabbi Jacobs had been a writer for the Chicago Tribune and was a free lance writer. Rabbi wrote for various synagogues in the Southland. We were joined by Father Terry Richey who worked for the department of "Alcohol and Substance Abuse" at the Chancery Office.

## **From Lamb to Lion**

I came up with an idea. I said to Terry, "Let's go up and see the Teamster's President. So we went up 12 stories and I asked, "I want to see the President." The secretary said, "???" I said, "Yes, bring him out." She told the Vice President, "It was all wrong for a big union like the Teamsters trying to smash a small union like the U.F.W.O.C." He said, "Take a note Miss Smith." The President is in Hawaii, would you like to talk to the Vice President? I said, "Yes, take a note!" We then went down the elevator to the first floor and the entrance to the building. I turned to Terry and said, "You know I used to be very shy when I left Ireland.

And Terry said to me, "Sean, the next time you have an attack of shyness, I'd sure like to be around. From lamb to lion in a few hours!"

Most of my involvement with the Farm Workers was while I was an associate Priest at St. Anthony's Parish in San Gabriel. I was to be in the parish for 8-1/2 happy years. It was a big parish that actually incorporated all of the City of Rosemead. I was kept busy in the parish. It was manageable as long as the other associate, Father Royale Vadakin was there. He was transferred after being with me for three years. I kept getting more and more involved with the Farm Labor Movement. Father Glennon was very under-

standing, and we had help from the Salesian priests from John Bosco Tech in South San Gabriel. I always wanted to do my share of the parish work. I had the energy to do it, but the strain began to tell.

I found myself saying six Masses on any given Saturday. I found myself dreading to say one more Mass. I finally decided to do something about it while having dinner with Fr. Glennon. I mentioned to him, “You know this past Saturday, I said six Masses.”

He was startled and said, “How so?”

“Well,” I said, “I said the 6:30 a.m. Mass, a Funeral Mass at 9:00 a.m., a Quinceaneros at 10:30, and a marriage at 2:00 p.m., and the evening Mass at 5:00 p.m. Father Glennon, always an air-minded man, dropped the 6:30 a.m. Mass and said the 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. himself. It made a difference; I was able to say Mass with devotion and got a spiritual charge out of saying each Mass.

I say this because I am aware of how hard parish work is. There was an impression among the priests in Ireland that the priests in America had a lot of time off. It wasn’t until the Irish priests started to supply American parishes that they realized how hard-working the priests in America were.

When I came to St. Anthony’s I found that a goodly amount of parishioners were involved in Social Action. There was a lady Estelle Holtz from Iowa, a teacher who knew how to organize, and it had to do with keeping the City Counselors of Rosemead on the straight and narrow. They even voted out of office Counselors who weren’t true to their promises. I was sad to see later, after I left the parish, that they lost a big fight to keep Walmart out of Rosemead. The City voted to approve land sold by the Southern California Edison Company. It was approved by the Council despite vigorous opposition by the citizens of Rosemead.

Father Glennon, too, was an activist and gave encouragement to his parishioners on their various causes from behind the scenes. When Cal-

trans wanted to build a station on San Gabriel Boulevard that would eliminate 500 homes, Father Glennon came out swinging. He rallied the parishioners, called for a meeting with the Mayor and Council of San Gabriel, and filled the hall with his parishioners. I remember him saying, "A man's home is his castle, one of his most precious possessions." Caltrans backed away and built the station at Del Mar Avenue, a half mile away from St. Anthony's. The Mayor never forgot the fiery Irish priest at St. Anthony's.

So I divided my time (fairly well, I think) between parish and the pursuit of Social Justice. I got mildly involved in J. P. Stevens; Coors Beer and Soviet Jewery Justice. But my primary concern was with the farm workers and their attempts to unionize. There was an issue that came on the ballot about the right of the Union to make contact with the workers in the field during lunch break. In the beginning about 77% polled favored the farm workers, but the growers got busy and hired a PR firm in Westwood. They hit on a great idea to defeat the measure, namely the defense of property rights. If this measure succeeded, then anyone can invade your property on the pretext of contacting your workers. The initiative failed. Cesar said at the trial, "We are using old tactics to win our cause. Our opposition moved on to more sophisticated methods. We have to also."

I was deeply involved in this one and raised five thousand dollars for the cause. I could have incurred the wrath of my fellow priests, not so much that they favored the cause, but the times I chose to approach the priests. I waited until we had the diocesan golf tournament. As the tournament was coming to an end, the priests would come together for cocktails before dinner. Then I made my rounds and had thrown down my copybook and had them pay on the spot. One priest I knew well said, "Sean, couldn't you pick a better time then when the boys were enjoying themselves?"

I said, "But other times are there so many priests called together?" He agreed with me and the priests were generally supportive of what I was doing. I also realized I was a good fundraiser. I had to rebuild the organ at



St. Catherine at a cost of \$160,000. I ran into tough opposition, but nevertheless there were enough people who felt I was doing the right thing and the organ was re-built.

## **A Meditation That Took a Strange Twist**

Every morning I do a half-hour meditation just before the 9:30 a.m. Mass. Usually I squirm a lot, but that day I let my mind go wherever it went. It started with my thinking about what an unusual background I had. In my life, I was born in Dublin, and my brother, Vincent, was born in Wicklow town. My parents were both from County Leitrim and we came to a town that was evenly located between Counties Mayo and Roscommon. I had to ask myself, “Who do I belong to? Which of the above should I be loyal to?” As a young lad I couldn’t come to a conclusion. I determined I would be a child of the world, but the bewilderment continued. Father Tom Glynn, my very best friend, had an uncle killed in the War of Independence, and he was a diehard De Valera supporter. On the other hand, my Dad’s oldest brother, my uncle Frank, was killed on the Western Front fighting with the Brits and was killed in the last German offensive of the Great War. During the Second World War we were on the side of the allies. Most of the people in the town were not. They found it almost impossible to forget how the Black and Tans had betrayed the town only twenty years before. (Americans had difficulty in accepting the neutrality of the Republic of Ireland because they weren’t so sure of the neutralities inflicted on the Irish people.)

We lived in the town of Ballghaderreen for 9 1/2 months and spent our summers with our aunts in the country. The town boys were called “townies” who called those coming from the country, “country buffs.” When the country buffs were mentioned all I could do was remain silent. Then my mother, Mary Catherine Gallagher, went to the States when she was sixteen. She was very lucky. She was hired as a domestic for a wealthy family

called the Haigs in White Plains, New York. She was a domestic for a few years and really became a nanny for the girls as they grew up. She was much loved by the girls and the whole family. (I could tell by the numerous letters that came from the girls. When mother was just about to be made a citizen, the Haigs insisted on mother being driven by limousine, complete with a chauffeur to the County Courthouse.) She was passionate about America. When I was afflicted with bronchitis and couldn't even run or walk fast, I stayed at home a lot with Mother, and she regaled me with her stories about her life in the U.S.. I became an America-phile, as a result.

When I was a year or two in my first parish a fourth grader asked me what county I loved the best, Ireland or America. I said to him, "Well it is sort of like which do you like best, your father or your mother?" The answer I told the fourth grader was, "You love them both, but in different ways." It wasn't a complete, perfect answer because I think that most fourth graders would say they liked the mother better. But it wasn't a bad answer, when I had the question sprung on me. That followed all through my adult life. I fought for not only the Farm Workers but also the textile workers (of J.P. Stevens), the brewery workers (the Coors company), and Soviet Jewry (where I met Leonard Nimoy). Apart from those causes, I generally viewed things from both sides, but not always. When I started the Spanish Masses at St. Catherine's (the first to do it in the West Valley) I got a lot of accolades from the leaders of the Spanish community, but as Berta Medina said, "Monsignor Sean said that moving the Spanish Mass to 9:30 a.m. on Sunday was a difficult move for the Anglo community, so he regretted not being more sensitive to them or how he approached the transition."

## **From Conservative to Liberal**

During my four years in La Habra I was very much exposed to conservative ideas. Father Coleman (whom I adored) was quite right wing. As long as I was with him, he defended Joe McCarthy and greatly admired his

defense lawyer, Cohen. He was mildly conservative in religion, although his favorite saint was Thomas More. (His painting hung on the wall in his sitting room. I became enamored with Thomas More, as a result.) La Habra was part of Orange County which was largely conservative and Republican. Despite this I was attracted to “the other side.” We had one very erudite group in the Christian Family Movement. All but one of the members were Right Wing. (Although I always thought they were not only erudite, but fair-minded.) However one of the group, Bob Hanna, was an ardent Democrat.

The bright light in Orange County were the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange. They supported many causes that brought them into contention with the rest of Orange County. Another group who supported liberal causes was the Servite Fathers who ran a high school in Anaheim. In particular was the oldest priest, Father Grimes who helped us out on Sunday with the Masses. Quite often he would be confronted with four or five men about some remarks he made in his sermons. Funny enough, Father Coleman never interfered or curtailed Father Grimes.

The biggest influence in my transit from an Irish Conservative to a California Liberal (I always prefer “progressive”) was Father Tom Glynn who became my best friend after Father John Sheahan exited my life, and it wasn’t exactly Tom Glynn who helped me make the transition. He had a pastor, Monsignor Tom McCarthy, originally from Worchester, Massachusetts. Whenever Tom Glynn tried to present a Conservative point of view, the good Monsignor would say, “Yes, Tom, that is a point of view, but let me present another point of view.” He then did it in a kindly different way, so that Tom Glynn was able to say to Bishop Manning, “I am grateful to Monsignor McCarthy because he treats me like an adult.” For every week from golf together on our day off, I got to hear what Monsignor McCarthy’s opinion was on religion and politics. Every week my ideas were changing. As I think back on those “changes,” I have to admit I was somehow oriented

with “new ideas.” My father, although he was fired by the Freestate, (the opposite to DeValera and of the Fianna Gail party). He could see the good and the bad in both sides.

The end result is that I became a progressive in politics and religion. When Fr. Dan Danielson (with the encouragement of his bishop), began a four-month courses to update us in the teaching of Vatican II, I was in the second group to join. What a great experience that was. We had lectures from the Graduate School of Theology in Berkeley. Later on I gave classes (six I believe) on the Documents of Vatican II and got completely enamored with the said documents. I always say, “The Documents of Vatican II are the finest teaching since the Sacred Scriptures, both New and Old Testament.”

## **My Little Mother**

*Written on May 12, 2017, the 100th Anniversary Of the First Apparition of Our Lady of Fatima, Portugal, 1917*

I made a meditation every day before Mass from 9 to 9:30 a.m.. This time I left unto the Holy Spirit to guide me as to what I should meditate on. (I had consulted three meditation books by way of preparation) and low and behold the image that appeared in my mind was that of my second mother, Winifred Freyne. My first mother died in 1946 at the age of 39. I was 10-1/2 years old and my brother, Vincent, was 8 1/2. Three and a half years after the death of my first mother, Mary Catherine Gallagher, my Dad decided to re-marry. It was an arranged marriage; I don't know how it was arranged or who made the arrangements, but I know Winifred's brother, Paddy, was very much involved. He was married himself to a Catherine White who lived with them in Tobracken. I don't know how Winifred felt about the arrangement, but it took enormous courage to take on two teenagers. I was fourteen and Vincent was twelve. We were sent away to our

aunts in Leitrim for the weekend, and the marriage took place quietly in the Cathedral.

Winifred was a little lady, and quite shy, so for a few years, she didn't have much of an impact on us. Then, as the years went by, we began to realize what a treasure we had in her. She had a very secluded upbringing. She told me once that until she married Dad, she was never more than three miles from her home. Her big thrill was to join with four or five of her girlfriends on a Sunday after the midday meal, and they would walk over the fields three miles to see the Bishop's Palace. They would sit on the top of the hill overlooking the Palace and chatter for a few hours until it was time to walk back over the fields to get back for evening tea.

All that changed when she married into the Flanagan clan. The first challenge was how do we address her. The word for Mother was "Mammy." Somehow it was left to me to decide what title she should have. I had been getting the comics every month from my Aunt Rose in New York, and from them I got the word, "Mom." I tried it and it worked, but she always confided later that she like the words, "Your Mam."

What a housekeeper she was! I prefer to call her "a great homemaker." She cooked the best of Irish meals. In the earlier years we had an open fire, fuelled by turf (or peat). She baked soda bread every other day and even put hot coals over the lid while she made the bread beautifully brown with a lovely crust. During the week she had to have lunch at 1:00 p.m. when Dad got home from the barracks, and we had a half hour from St. Nathy's for the big meal of the day. Though Dad was a great gardener, Mom was able to advise him on things like how she'd split the potatoes for growing.

She was very devout. When to Sunday Mass arriving she was there a half an hour before Mass began. She went to Confession once a month. (We often wondered if she invented sins to tell the priest!) Unlike families around us, we did not say the rosary together. (The upset of our first mother's death kind of prevented that.)

She had a great sense of humor. She'd tell us funny stories about her neighbors on Tobracken and Carry. Typical of the women at that time, would have a glass of sherry at Christmas time. She might join her cousin, Lilly for a drink at the hotel across the street. She couldn't stop laughing when telling us about Lilly falling off the stool at the hotel when she had "one too many." Strangely enough she never went visiting. She expected them to come to her, and they did. I always enjoyed her cousin, Mrs. Frain who would visit us once a month and complain mildly of her bad nerves. "Me nerves do be bad," she would say.

Her cooking was really excellent at Christmas. I would arrive, and my brother too, a few days before Christmas. Everything was ready. The plum pudding was hung in the kitchenette wrapped in gauze. The turkey was plucked, cleaned and massaged with oil. Candles were in the windows upstairs. I loved the plum pudding in the days after Christmas when it was served with hot custard. Things improved for mother when we gave her a No. 9 Stanley range, and Vincent bought them a refrigerator. (She used to put the milk under the stairs with gauze on top.)

When I came home from America I'd take the folks for a week in different Counties. Vincent tipped me off about houses that could be rented for a week or two at amazingly low prices. As well as that we got a great exchange for our dollars. Our best trip was when we hired a house in West Cork. Mother would cook dinner early, and we'd take off for different areas of West Cork like Carberry Isles, Glengarrif, Gughan, Barri, Beare, Bantry Bay, and others. We had lots of time to tarry and eat in various villages, especially along the sea. It didn't get really dark until after 11:00 p.m. The weather was beautiful throughout.

I often regret I did not twist their arms to come to America, but mother was scared of flying. She made one exception for Vincent's wedding in Bristol, England. I got a lesson in underestimating the charisma of country people. Vincent married the daughter of the Chancellor of Bristol University.

The professor put on a lavish dinner at the best hotel in Bristol. Some way or another I got separated from mother. The head table seated about thirty people, and mother and I were opposite ends of the table. She was seated among university people of Bristol University and Ann's colleagues from Cambridge. I looked down nervously to see how mother was doing. As far as I could see, she seemed to be doing fine. When the dinner came to an end, a bunch of the intellectual elite made a bee-line for me, and they all had the same refrain, "Your mother is absolutely 'dawlin'" I never worried about mother again.

## The Gallaghers

Around my second year in the Seminary, I was Visiting the quaint town of Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim, and I decided to stop in at my Father's Church to say a few prayers. On the way out I was waylaid by a Mr. Kelleher, actually Master Kelleher. (He was a retired school teacher.) "Oh," he said, "it does me heart good to see a young Levite praying in the Church. And would you be visiting these parts?"

I said, "Actually I am, but my father came from Comashamsogue, and my mother grew up 3-1/2 miles from here."

"Oh," he said. "That would be the tall Flanagan girls that came to shop in Drumshanbo. (Katie, Mary and Lizzie were indeed tall.) " And you said your mother was from the other side of the town?"

I said, "Yes. She was from Kilturbrid in the town land of Cornaleck. (It used to be Moycullen.)

"Ah, yes," the old man said. "That would be John the Lord's family. Great people the Gallaghers. Fought all their way down from County Donegal." Master Kelleher knew his stuff. When my brother, Vincent, pursued the family history, he discovered that our great grandfather came from Raphoe in northern Donegal. He was a horse dealer who did very well for himself.

Came down to Leitrim and acquired 200 acres of land. He later divided it up at 20-acre parcels, and kept 40 acres for himself and his brother, James (who never married). His son, John Gallagher, my grandfather, inherited 40 acres which included Bogland. Apparently he was quite a leader among the neighbors, hence “John the Lord” was a title bestowed on him by the neighbors.

Out of that marriage were born nine children.

- 1) Ambrose - 1898, the first to go to New York
- 2) Patrick - June 1, 1900, died of Tuberculosis (TB)
- 3) Bridget(Bessie) – followed Ambrose to New York
- 4) Mary Catherine - 1904, My Mother, married Joseph Malachy Flanagan, a guard
- 5) John William (or Uncle Sean) - 1906, followed Ambrose & Bessie to New York
- 6) Rose Ann - 1909, followed others to New York
- 7) MaryEllen - 1912, always called Nellie, married Bernie Mulvey
- 8) Maria Ann - 1914, referred to as “Alice” ended living with Lizzie in Birmingham, England
- 9) Elizabeth Agnes – 1918, always called Lizzie in Birmingham, England

The Gallaghers were very proud of their heritage. Their mother was Maria Connifrey, wife of Master Connifrey, a brilliant school teacher. When Vincent and John Walsh were winning scholarship after scholarship, Nellie and others remarked, they had the Connifrey brain. The Connifrey Family had carved out a farm in the mountainside. The Connifrey were banished there after it became known that he’d joined the French against the British in the Insurrection of 1798. Later between 1682 and 1782 the Connifreys hid a priest in a cave that became known as “Father Dan’s Cave” as the



British government tried to wipe out Catholicism. My seminary was the first seminary open at the end of the Penal Days 1782. They had a very appropriate motto: "Heim's Transit, Winter has passed." Nellie, Alice, and Lil\_\_\_? were very conscious that they were John the Lord's daughters. They were all singers- particularly Lizzie. They had a cousin, Jimmy, who had clubbed feet and had to ride a horse, was one of the sweetest singers according to all who knew him. He was identified by the song, *The Old Rustic Bridge by the Mill*.

I remember going with Nellie and Lizzie to Doyle Public House in Kiltubrid, and when the dancing started the two of them never left the floor. They were a joy to watch. By contrast the Flanagans tended to be reserved, quiet and enjoyed watching. Nellie said about the Flanagans, "Oh you could stick a stick at them, and you couldn't stir them."

## Epilogue

One lady who typed my memoirs remarked, "You left some loose ends in your story. For example you talked about growing cold when your mother died. Did you ever recover?"

The answer is a resounding "Yes", which was mostly due to my involvement in 12-step programs. The first step was to let my sponsor, Terry Richey, know about my deep dark secret. He didn't answer my question directly all he did was to share an experience he had early in his program. He said he had an old timer as his sponsor. They went together on a 12-step call. The situation was really bad. The man who had required help was sitting in the dark in his small apartment with unfinished food beside his armchair, with signs he hadn't made it to the bathroom.

The sponsor said let's try to clean him up and the room, before people arrive to bring him to rehab. Terry went through the process without flinching.

When they finished the old man said, “Terry, you have to be the coolest dude I ever across.” That was all the advice Terry had for me. But the conclusion I took from it was, you don’t have to worry about the emotions as long as you’re doing the right thing and helping somebody. The emotions will take care of itself.

And of course, it did as I worked the program, admitting my mistakes, making amends and trying to be of service. I began to discover I was basically very sentimental, very emotional. I could choke describing some event in my life; reading a passage from the scriptures and observing the innocence of a child, and their interaction with one another.

I remember Old Beno, a Jewish gentleman who celebrated his ninetieth birthday in our Parish hall. He said, “I have become so emotional that I can cry at the opening of a gas station”.

I remember in 2014 on what was to be my last vacation in Ireland, I said Mass at the gable end of the Shine in Knock. I must have an idea that it has to be my last time to say Mass at the Shrine, I got so emotional that I didn’t think I could finish the Mass. So, I discovered that emotions can be very painful, but I accept the package deal. As I go on to encounter more experiences I think of a line from the secretary of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, “For all that has been- thanks; for all that will be - yes!”

*(Proofread and edited with minor corrections by  
Fr. Tom Welbers, July 1918)*